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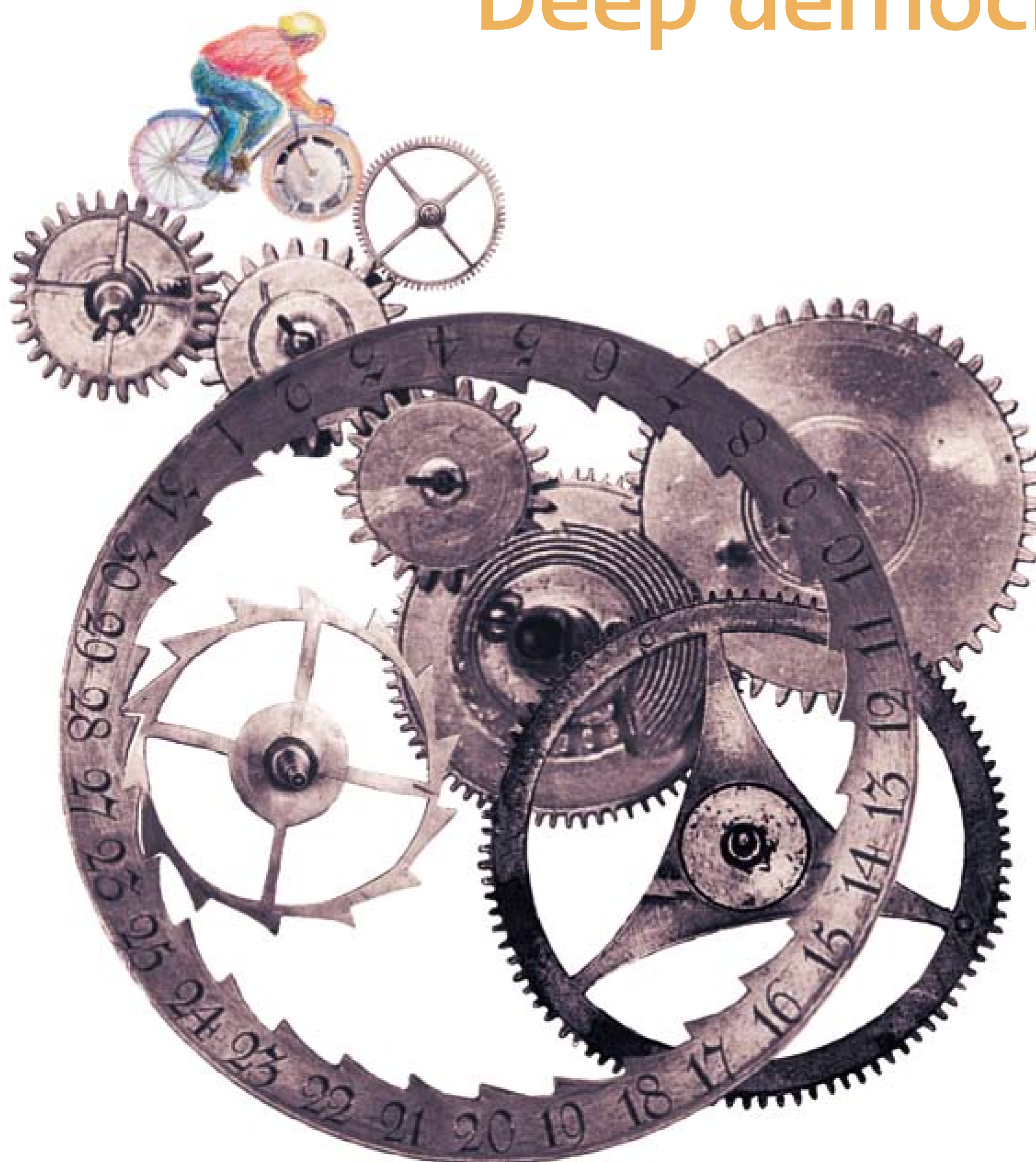
Civic Driven Change Initiative

Deep democracy



How institutions evolve * 'Child labour' versus 'child work' * Irish Aid debates * 'Researchers must map the world'

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CONNECTING WORLDS OF KNOWLEDGE

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Letters to the Editor

Built-to-order states

In his article ‘Donors and the fragile states agenda’ (*The Broker 9*), Chris van der Borgh describes the conflicting objectives of various donor agendas regarding fragile states and the problems they create for formulating and pursuing policy. As the article makes clear, donors use the label ‘fragile’ for a list of countries in which there is armed conflict (or the threat of it) and/or bad governance, usually combined with a generally low level of socio-economic development.

Policy makers and academics stubbornly insist on proposing macro-level solutions for conflict areas on the basis of questions such as ‘what can we do about fragile states?’ The lion’s share of the literature, however, emphasizes that external actors have only a limited influence on the processes of state-building and democratization. Conflict, bad governance and socio-economic insecurity are caused by a combination of internal and external factors. Institutionalizing the monopoly on violence and state power is a long and nonlinear process in every country.

There is little point in imposing radical institutional reforms that do not correspond to social reality, because ‘informal institutions’ – rules of the game and ways of organizing collective activities embedded in the local culture, society and everyday economic activity – are more tenacious and will reinterpret and undermine programmes of imposed (‘formal’) change. In addition, developing trust between groups of people is a crucial factor for the functioning of a democratic state. In conflict areas, where relations between people are horrifically disrupted, it is a particularly long process.

The academic discussions on the sequence of institution building and democratization imply that states can be ‘built to order’. But processes of state-building, institutionalization of power and democratization cannot be steered to that extent. A fragile state has a structure and a history that largely determines the degree to which certain interventions will succeed. Many academic discussions and policy documents now rightly conclude with a call to design international interventions with more realistic and less ambitious expectations.

Even if expectations of what external interventions can achieve are lowered, the question remains whether ‘the focus, in general’ is correct. Policy makers acknowledge that fragility has varied and complex causes. Yet, in seeking solutions, they focus on strengthening legitimate (democratic) state institutions and expect the state to address the issues in the country. This idea is based on a model of the state as an apolitical actor that operates in the interests of the people. In most fragile states this is far from political and social reality, and is therefore of little use as a starting point for policy.

The obsession with macro solutions and the strengthening of the state offers few opportunities to improve the lot of people living in insecure and marginalized circumstances. We, as academics and practitioners, must therefore ensure that we do not become too bogged down in this perspective.

First, humility and a sense of reality are indispensable in international interventions. Second, it is essential that policy makers and academics place not ‘the state’ but the complex and dynamic whole of power relations and conflicting interests in a society at the centre of their analyses and strategies.

Johan te Velde is team leader in the Africa and Latin America departments at IKV Pax Christi.

Anne Slootweg is an anthropological researcher in postwar reconstruction, democratization processes, political culture and the impact of international interventions.

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Connecting and catalyzing

Frans Bieckmann
Editor in Chief
editor@thebrokeronline.eu

Burkinabé writer and politician Joseph Ki-Zerbo said,'*On ne développe pas, on se développe*' ('People aren't developed; people develop themselves'). He argued for a development strategy 'that gets its force from local realities and our own values, and which is open for all positive influences from outside'. There is a long tradition in development thinking that stresses the need for this kind of bottom-up approach.

So what is new about a group of intellectuals from around the world proposing the idea of a third narrative for development, alongside 'state' and 'market': civic driven change (CDC)? This issue's special report explains exactly what those involved in the so-called CDC Initiative mean by CDC. In short: citizens, moved by values such as inclusiveness, respect for diversity and concern for the planet, organize themselves in their own communities to achieve a more just economic and political order and more sustainable use of the earth, at local, national and global levels.

What is new here are the political and policy contexts. Dominant development models are criticized more and more. The nation state is still the central unit of analysis and policy establishment for most traditional development agencies. But there is growing doubt over whether it is the state – and its economic and governing elites – that should be the focus of aid, or whether it is the people, especially those who are increasingly marginalized. There are poor people everywhere, and there are rich and powerful elites in even the poorest countries. And the 'market', the solution enforced upon the developing world for the last three decades, is now dramatically collapsing, at least in the extreme neoliberal variety.

CDC can be an alternative – especially for NGOs – to the current technocratic approach to development cooperation that is embodied, for example, in the MDGs. The MDGs are essentially an example of providing services and financial means to the poor and trying to push reforms at state level. This top-down approach ignores many insights that have emerged over the past decades – for example, the school of thought that puts human beings at the centre of development and describes the nature of development as a question of power, power relations and ways to change them. Poverty is conceived in terms of lack of access; the aim of human development is to create the freedom and opportunities for human beings to develop themselves.

The participants of the CDC Initiative are the first to emphasize that many of their ideas are not new. However, innovation in the 21st century – not only in development, but also in business, for example – is not a matter of coming up with an entirely new concept, but rather of finding new ways to combine what is already known. As globalization is blurring traditional divides, innovation is the 'articulation' of many separate threads in and beyond both social sciences and development practices. Innovation means adapting an intelligent, efficient and strategic combination of existing ideas, experiences, practices and knowledge, to rapidly changing circumstances.

In this sense, the CDC Initiative, at least in terms of its aims, is certainly new. The CDC brainstorming sessions that took place earlier this year brought together experts from many countries and backgrounds, who tried to link the very local realities with the more abstract but also very real trends at a global level.

And even if CDC isn't new, it could become a clear alternative for the current approaches to development. It can provide concrete tools and guidelines for bringing into practice what is already preached by many: that development is essentially a political process, and that human beings – rather than states or markets – should be at its core. CDC stems from the real problems people face in their neighbourhoods. Instead of ideals, interests or wishes imposed by external elites to 'uplift' the poor, it is the reality, values and interests of the people involved that should be the starting point of eventual external interventions.

The effort to create a new CDC narrative comes at a time when many development NGOs are submitting themselves and their policies to a thorough self-examination. Putting into practice this CDC narrative would mean facing some difficult choices. Should NGOs continue providing services to the poor, in a complementary manner with donors, and thinking that only states and markets can bring change to citizens of developing countries?

Or, should NGOs take a different approach? Encouraging change inherently means opposing some powers that be, including those allied with the elites in developing countries who are now the partners of bilateral donors. NGOs could play the role of catalysts of endogenous change processes. Another question is how to 'connect' thousands of small community initiatives that are already taking place. This role of NGOs as 'connectors' (or 'brokers') would help to create some more power *vis-à-vis* globally organized agencies, businesses, structures and processes.

Of course, in real life the divide between these two categories of foreign 'aid' is much blurrier, and the broad NGO practices contain elements of CDC already. But many big NGOs are sucked into technocratic aid delivery mechanisms and donor countries' local politics. So much so that it is good to view things as more black and white: NGOs should ask themselves the fundamental questions CDC poses. They should engage in the debate that the CDC Initiative has started, and which *The Broker* will follow. Only by thinking it through in all its dimensions we will know whether CDC is really the alternative narrative it promises to be. ■

How institutions evolve

Shaping behaviour

Development is mostly about transforming institutions – cultural values, legal frameworks, market mechanisms and political processes. If aid is failing, it is in part because agencies misunderstand institutions and how they change.

When the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, many people in western democracies, including the 'experts' of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, assumed that the teetering Soviet Union would quickly transform into an efficient free market economy. Many believed that rapid economic development and greater prosperity would follow.

In reality, other than a tiny minority that profited enormously from dubious processes of privatization, most of the former Soviet bloc was in economic crisis throughout the 1990s. There was a disastrous drop in the standard of living for most of its population. For free marketeers, international financial institutions (IFIs) and development agencies, it was a tough lesson about both the importance of the institutions that underpin a market economy, and about how much time it takes to develop them. By 2002, the focus of the World Bank's World Development Report was on 'Building Institutions for Markets'.

Market institutions are not the only challenge. Responding to all the current issues, such as climate change, social injustice or declining resources, requires an unprecedented depth, scale and pace of institutional innovation. Society is struggling to cope with the negative side effects of industrialization and globalization. Humanity's capacity for rapid technological innovation has far outstripped its capacity for institutional innovation, with potentially catastrophic consequences.

Over the last decade, the concepts of 'institutions' and 'institutional development' have become heavily embedded in the language of aid. Current development themes, such as markets that work for the poor, good governance and rights-based approaches, demand a strong emphasis on institutions. Yet there is confusion about how to define these concepts and to translate them into practical methods for analysis. There are also many challenging questions about how institutions evolve and to what extent they can be purposefully designed or changed.

Nevertheless, the well-being of people and the environment hinges on finding new ways to transform institutions to cope with the challenges created by technology-focused development. Interactive forms of society-wide learning need to be evolutionary rather than linear, and must be founded on a solid understanding of the institutional complexity of social systems. These ideas have major implications for the goals, processes and mechanisms of aid.

By **Jim Woodhill**, director of the Capacity Development and Institutional Change Programme at Wageningen University and Research Centre, the Netherlands. He specializes in applying systems thinking and participatory learning approaches to complex development issues.

Summary

- Institutions are sets of formal and informal 'rules' that enable and structure all forms of social interaction.
- Any form of development and social change requires institutional innovation.
- Societies have become much better at technological innovation than institutional innovation – a mismatch that underlies the global crises of inequality, climate change and resource depletion.
- Institutional innovation requires nonlinear, complex and evolutionary processes of change.
- Coping with the complex crises of our times will require new forms of social learning and political engagement that dramatically enhance capacities for institutional innovation.

Which side of the road?

Broadly speaking, institutions can be understood as the 'rules' that make ordered society possible, such as language,

Hollandse Hoogte/Workbook

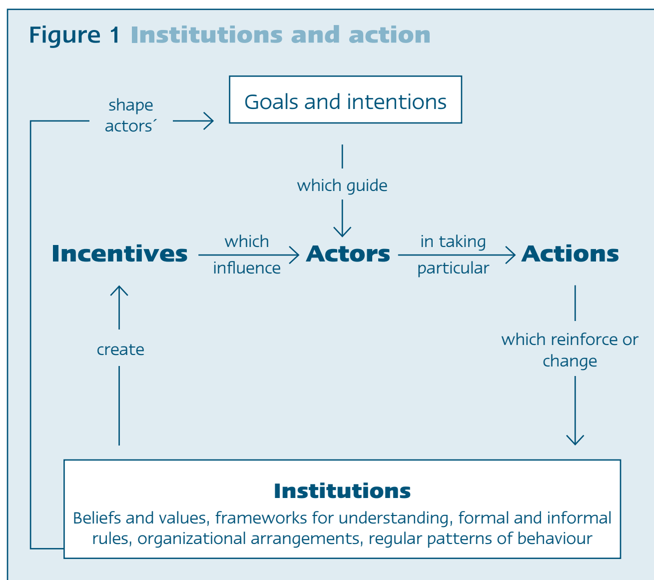
currency, marriage, property rights, taxation, education and laws. Institutions help individuals know how to behave in a given situation, such as when driving in traffic, bargaining at a market or attending a wedding.

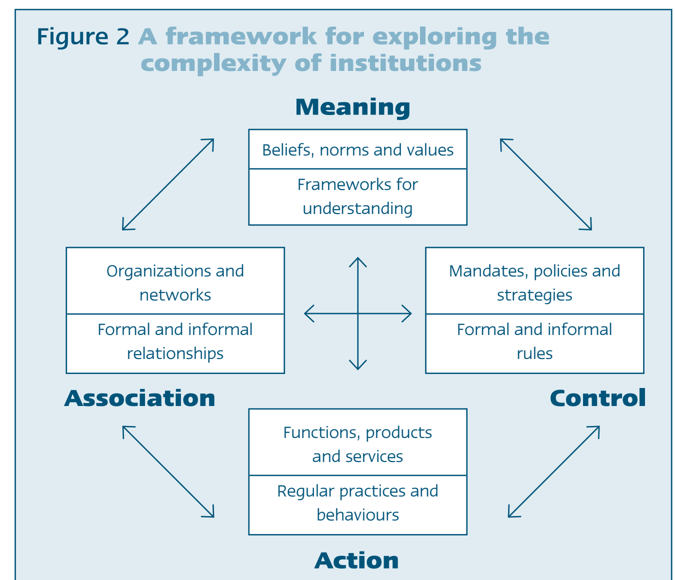
Institutions are critical for establishing trust in society. We put our money in a bank because we trust that all the institutions of the financial system will protect it. We board an airplane because we trust the institutions related to air traffic control and the monitoring of aircraft maintenance to keep us safe.

By definition, institutions are the more stable and permanent aspects of human systems. Some institutions, once developed, lock societies into a particular path of development. For example, the simple convention of which side of the road to drive on is very hard to imagine changing once it has been established.

Many institutions have evolved without much conscious design, and they interrelate with each other in a complex network. The rules of language make it possible for laws to be established, and these laws are then upheld by courts and policing systems. People obey laws because of a whole system of societal beliefs, values and norms. Our lives are embedded in this highly complex web of social institutions, and we take many of them for granted, not questioning their origin or the underlying assumptions and beliefs on which they are based.

Does bringing about social change require focusing on the individual – following the maxim of 'think globally, act locally' – or on social structures? Change is a complex dynamic of social structure and individual action. Institutions essentially create incentives, both positive and negative, for individuals and groups to act in particular ways. People behave either >





to reinforce or undermine an institution (see figure 1).

Individuals and organizations have their own goals and objectives that are shaped by wider institutional and cultural environments. Deciding to take certain actions at particular times involves many interconnected and sometimes conflicting factors. Choices can counter a dominant institutional influence, whether legal or cultural. Hence, institutions are not a straitjacket for human decision making and action.

A messy web

There is no widely accepted framework for analyzing institutions. The multiple perspectives and lack of practical tools makes it difficult to understand how institutions influence a particular situation, whereas numerous tools exist for stakeholder, problem and power analysis. Yet thinking critically about institutions is key to social change-focused development.

People are rarely concerned with any single institution. Whether our focus is on education, market access, health or the environment, we must consider a messy web of many interacting institutions.

Figure 2 shows a simple framework for asking critical questions about different types of institutions and how they interact. It deliberately takes a very broad perspective, including organizations and regular patterns of behaviour alongside the more narrow view of institutions as merely 'rules'. The framework is based on four institutional domains – meaning, association, control and action – which connect to structure social interaction. Each of the four domains has two sub-domains.

Formal and informal institutions are equally important, and often reinforce each other. Figure 2 shows that each domain considers both sides of the coin. Institutional analysis often focuses too much on formal rules, such as policies and laws. This framework shows the importance of asking questions about a wider set of factors that interact to shape the incentives for actors to behave in particular ways.

Consider the current concern about food quality and safety. Consumer beliefs ('meaning') – perhaps about the health risks of genetically modified organisms – and buying behaviour ('action') have a significant role in shaping business strategy and government policy making ('control'). A framework for scientific understanding and research ('meaning') underpins food quality and safety regulation and procedures. Organizationally, government agencies are responsible for food safety issues, and many different businesses interact along the value chain ('association'). Government food safety agencies are mandated to develop policies and establish rules and regulations, while the agrifood industry independently develops its own policies, standards and rules to meet consumer demands and legal requirements ('control'). These arrangements lead to the institutionalization of supporting actions, such as regular monitoring of imports by a food safety authority, or agribusinesses introducing bar coding and tracking systems ('action'). Some behaviours ('action') by different actors, including corruption, may disregard the formal rules and be driven by informal customs and rules ('control').

Complexity and institutional change

Intuitively we all know that much of what we deal with in life is 'complex'. Yet the scientific and engineering mindset of the 20th century has too often led us to try to manage complex situations linearly. And sometimes, linear approaches make a lot of sense. Each time we fly in an airplane we should be thankful that engineers work linearly. However, to protect us from terrorist attack, security systems must function differently. They need to be able to sense the unexpected and to make insightful interpretations from a mass of messy data.

The development sector seems to be embracing the complexity idea (*The Broker* 9). Understanding institutions is central to grasping the complexity and dynamics of social change. What makes social systems complex is the multitude of interacting institutions, combined, of course, with the often unpredictable nature of human behaviour. Policy makers and practitioners must understand two points. First, no one has consciously designed the institutional

Lineair / Thomas Roetting

frameworks of our societies. They have evolved, over long periods of time, by adapting and responding to all sorts of experiments, new ideas, power plays and external shocks. Second, changing institutional arrangements is no simple task. The results are often unpredictable, with some expected outcomes not occurring and other unplanned changes happening instead.

The Cynefin framework

Complexity thinking can help people better understand how to intervene with systems in a structured yet

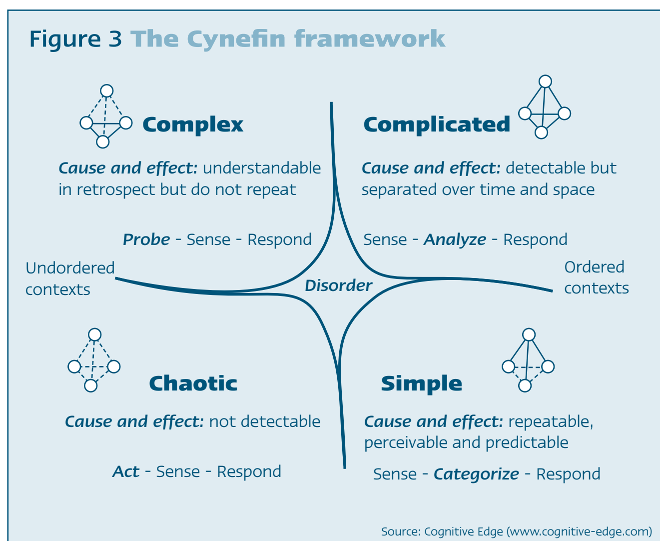


Figure 3 **The Cynefin framework**

Source: Cognitive Edge (www.cognitive-edge.com)

nonlinear way. One emerging practical application is the Cynefin framework. David Snowden, former director of the IBM Institute for Knowledge Management, developed the framework to help managers and leaders better understand the implications of complexity for strategy. The framework can help identify the types of leadership patterns, learning processes and intervention strategies that are appropriate for different levels of complexity.

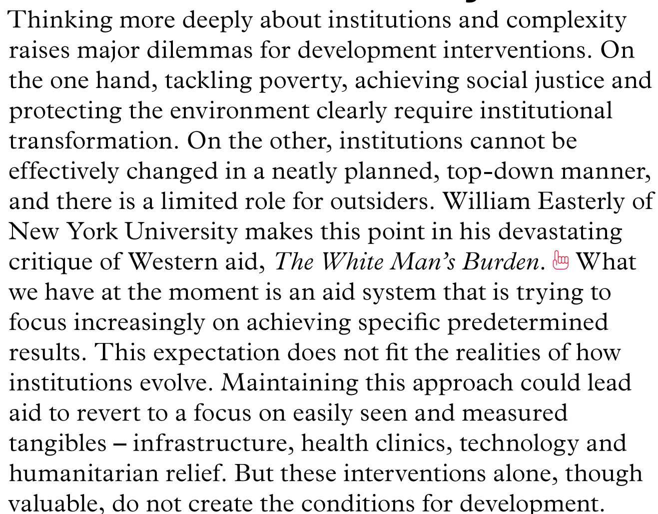
The Cynefin framework identifies five contexts: simple, complicated, complex, chaotic and disorder (when the context is unclear). This differentiation recognizes that not everything we want to achieve in development is complex. However, it also points out that applying approaches that work for simple and complicated situations to complex and chaotic situations will fail. For example, identifying 'best' and 'good' practices is fine for simple and complicated situations, but fairly pointless for a more complex problem. Yet, so often this is exactly what development agencies value and demand.

Linear planning, and with it much scientific analysis, is based on establishing clear cause-effect relationships and then using this knowledge to predict the outcome of a design or an intervention. In complex and chaotic contexts, cause-effect relationships either do not exist or cannot be assessed ahead of time. It is necessary to 'probe' – to experimentally test out a range of interventions to see which ones work or fail – and then to use this knowledge for scaling up or replicating. This essentially constitutes an evolutionary approach to >

‘design’. In chaotic or crisis situations, high turbulence requires acting to restore some degree of order with little time or information for analysis.

Much, but not all, institutional innovation involves engaging with the complex context. And when we talk of failed states we are often in a chaotic context. Yet much development planning and many policy processes focused on institutional transformation operate as if the context is complicated or simple, rather than complex or chaotic.

Institutional innovation and the aid game



Thinking more deeply about institutions and complexity raises major dilemmas for development interventions. On the one hand, tackling poverty, achieving social justice and protecting the environment clearly require institutional transformation. On the other, institutions cannot be effectively changed in a neatly planned, top-down manner, and there is a limited role for outsiders. William Easterly of New York University makes this point in his devastating critique of Western aid, *The White Man’s Burden*. What we have at the moment is an aid system that is trying to focus increasingly on achieving specific predetermined results. This expectation does not fit the realities of how institutions evolve. Maintaining this approach could lead aid to revert to a focus on easily seen and measured tangibles – infrastructure, health clinics, technology and humanitarian relief. But these interventions alone, though valuable, do not create the conditions for development.

If handled poorly, these dilemmas could severely undermine the western electorate’s support for aid. But sweeping these problems under the carpet is not an option. Consider the potentially devastating impacts of climate change, the fundamental realignments being driven by the emerging economies, or the increasingly interdependent nature of the world economy. Avoiding the potentially disastrous consequences of these risks requires an unprecedented level of institutional innovation that is globally coordinated and without the luxury of slow evolution. As Douglass North observed, ‘the interdependent world we are creating requires immense societal change and raises genuine problems about human adaptability’.

An institutional and complexity perspective offers no straightforward solutions, but has several principle-based implications. First, a deeper practical understanding of institutional innovation and the link to complexity is needed by development practitioners and policy makers. The current chasm between theory and practice on this issue must be bridged.

Second, aid must focus not on short-term concrete results, but on the long-term capacities and processes that will enable societies to be learning oriented and highly adaptive. Development trends, such as generic budget support, fail to value the role of civil society as part of the critical conscience that triggers institutional innovation. As Ulrich Beck noted:

> ‘The themes of the future, which are now on everyone’s lips, have not originated from the foresightedness of the rulers or from the struggle in parliament - and certainly not from the cathedrals of power in business, science and the state. They have been put on the social agenda against the concentrated resistance of this institutionalized ignorance by entangled, moralising groups and splinter groups fighting each other over the proper way, split and plagued by doubts’.

Third, those engaged in development need to distinguish between the simple, complicated, complex and chaotic, and recognize that each requires very different ways of intervening. Dealing with the complex means investing in multiple ‘experiments’ and scaling up what works – an evolutionary design approach to development intervention. By acknowledging that it is often impossible to know ahead of time what will or won’t succeed, we take seriously the need to invest in, accept and learn from so-called ‘failure’.

If investments only focus on sure bets, evolution and transformation is stifled. The big returns on investment may well come from the 20% of successes and the 80% of failures need to be seen as the legitimate cost of experimenting and learning. Most mutations in nature are deleterious, but some mutations lead to highly successful innovations. This is not an anything and everything goes approach. Rather, it involves careful upfront analysis of ‘good bets’, strategic investments in ‘out-of-the box’ thinking and diversified investments in ‘safe-fail’ experimentation. Crucially, it requires careful monitoring and learning, not against predetermined indicators, but by drawing on the experiences and observations of those directly involved. The insights and lessons from such learning-oriented monitoring and evaluation are then used to scale up investments in successes and scale down or close off investment in failure

Clearly we must remain deeply concerned about the results and impacts of development. Yet the evolutionary design principles that make impact possible, while commonsense to field workers, often remain an anathema to the linear logic of policy mechanisms of development planning. Overcoming the current scepticism about aid and development is going to require a much bigger investment in capacities and processes for institutional innovation. ■

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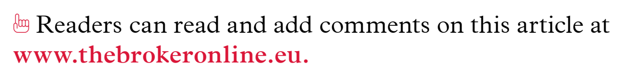

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Civic Driven Change Initiative

Deep democracy

For many decades, the main driver of progress in developing countries was considered to be either the state or the market. Civil society existed only in relation to, and by the grace of, these forces. But people-centred development requires that individuals take control and address the problems in their communities. People and organizations should acquire a stronger position in relation to both the state and the market. Real change can only be achieved through challenging dominant political and economic interests.

In January and May, a group of eight intellectuals, critical scientists and practitioners – each from a different country and background – examined the main elements of a new approach to development in a brainstorming session. The group members formed the Civic Driven Change (CDC) Initiative at the prompting of Alan Fowler and Kees Biekart. They considered the broad pallet of local political initiatives and change processes that are already taking place around the world, as well as the experiences and dilemmas of the global movement known from the World Social Forums (WSF) and other initiatives. The initial outcome of these sessions is a collection of essays, which are intended to be a starting point for a broad, global debate about how an alternative narrative on change can be realized. This special report highlights some elements from both the essays and the brainstorming sessions.

This is an initiative of some of the largest development and peace organizations in the Netherlands. Aware that the current aid paradigm is heavily under fire, they have facilitated an independent process that could eventually lead to drastic changes in their own policies. Will NGOs continue to 'assist' the poor from the outside with resources and expertise, or will they opt to strengthen the political and normative – the civic – struggles that people face within the market, the state and civil society?

ANP

By **Frans Bieckmann,** Editor in Chief of *The Broker.*

Reinventing citizen action

'The biggest failure of civil society organizations is their complete lack of political imagination', says Rakesh Rajani. 'NGOs are cut off from reality, they are not organic'. Rajani is among the eight CDC Initiative members who attended the second brainstorming meeting near the Dutch town of Hilversum in May 2008.

Rajani echoes the thoughts of many others: just like bilateral and multilateral development cooperation, the NGO world is at an impasse. Both Western and local NGOs have lost touch with reality. In the real world, there is a continual political struggle, people organize themselves to address countless local problems and political debates are conducted in the media. Meanwhile, NGOs focus on specialized projects that are conceived and funded by well meaning professionals in the Western and Southern capitals. NGOs exist in a sort of parallel universe, controlled by a governing elite in global networks, with its own system of rules and order. The notion that you can improve conditions in developing countries with 'technical' interventions (organizational assistance, training and advice) still dominates. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were founded on this principle.

Meanwhile, for at least 20 years there has been a discussion about the nature of development – implicitly or explicitly – as a political process with human beings at its centre. It is not a political process in the sense of elections and politicians' decisions, but a question of changing power relations. Feminist researchers made an important contribution to this shift in thinking by exposing power differences – not only in an abstract, general sense, but also between people and their individual qualities.

The theories of economist Amartya Sen and the many publications that build on them – such as the Human Development Report, the 2003 report Human Security Now and the World Development Report 2000 – think of poverty in terms of lack of access. The aim of human development is to create the freedom and the opportunities for people to develop themselves. But the conditions in which they can do it also have to be created, and that requires a very political programme.

These basic principles of human development are widely endorsed and are often referred to in speeches, but in practice mechanical aid reflexes that have the opposite effect – such as financial assistance and service delivery by external experts – continue to dominate. Furthermore, the state continues to be the focal point: we help developing countries, not the people who live in them. The donor community – not only bilateral donors, but also the multilateral organizations they finance and many NGOs – still thinks in terms of states and governments, of who should supply services to the poor and make markets work to supply jobs for them. Those NGOs and projects that focus on the people themselves often work on the basis of

Summary

- NGOs are increasingly working in a specialized parallel universe, cut off from real life and political struggles for change in the state, market and civil society.
- Civic Driven Change (CDC) could be a new narrative for development, alongside the state and the market as driving principles.
- The C in Civic stands for normative behaviour of inclusion and care for the whole.
- The D in Driven stands for the force of what people want for their future.
- The C in Change stands for the natural and political process of changing existing power relations, versus the more linear 'progress' or 'development'.
- CDC is a right and a responsibility of citizens whatever their function in life.
- Instead of the government, NGOs or external experts providing services, citizens must take control of their own lives; they must evolve from voters and consumers into the co-creators of a democratic society.
- Deepening democracy in all areas – the family, civil society, governance and the economy – and at all levels – local, national and global – is a central element of CDC.
- To actually make a difference, power analysis and corresponding local and global strategies are needed.
- There are already thousands of CDC initiatives, all over the world. But the problem lies in linking local and global structures. Real engagement by citizens – in the sense of tangible ties with their surroundings and the problems they face – is by definition local. However, a great deal of power has been wrested away from the local level. The challenge is therefore to link all these thousands of local initiatives, while avoiding undemocratic pitfalls.

What is civic driven change?

The task of the CDC Initiative is to 'promote a CDC that "reclaims" states and markets by and for people, rather than being subordinated to them'. Its core members have debated for a long time what they mean by 'civic driven change'. During their meeting in May 2008 the participants tried to capture the essence of the term in one sentence. Suggestions included 'Telling the citizens' story', 'Citizens reclaiming their future' and 'Bringing citizens back in' (a reference to Theda Skocpol's famous book, *Bringing the State Back In*).

The CDC Initiative is not exclusively an academic undertaking. That would be incompatible with the promotion of CDC that has 'self-organization of citizens around inclusive values' as its core value. Still it is important to carefully define what is meant by the term, because it helps explain why this initiative is innovative. And also because, according to Evelina Dagnino, terms such as 'citizenship', 'civil society' and 'participation' have become severely eroded; they are used by 'neo-liberals, radical democracy supporters and even conservatives' alike, and all of them assign very different meanings to it. You can add to this list of eroded terms 'empowerment', 'ownership' and even 'development' itself, which is often confused with economic growth.

In contrast with 'civil', the term 'civic' bears a moral and political meaning, and treats human beings not only as consumers, voters or citizens, but as wide range of individuals with their own points of view.

The word 'change' is used instead of 'development' or 'progress', which imply a much more technical and linear movement. Change is a completely natural process. It happens always and everywhere, day in and out, at many interdependent levels. Steps forward, backward, aside. Such steps can lead to new conflicts, because they erode existing power relations. In this sense CDC is much more 'political' than development.

Is CDC new? A clear 'no' emerged during the brainstorming sessions. It is refocusing rather than reinventing. It is about new combinations and mergers of what is already being explored in separate debates. It is about 'recapturing the local and the global in a new context'.

Of course, the concept of civil society has been the foundation on which most NGOs have built their activities for several decades. But civil society is generally conceived as a separate realm, apart from government and business. Civil society stands for all kinds of organizations within a society – NGOs, trade unions, community based organizations, churches and so on – that together or individually defend the interests of their constituencies. And especially in Africa, civil society has been narrowed down to NGOs, which in many cases have created their own service-delivering parallel structures. Civil society there was mainly defined in non-political terms; the creation of a strong civil society was an aim in itself.

What is new in CDC is that the 'civic' is normative. There is civic behaviour and there is uncivic, or undemocratic, behaviour – in the state and the market, but also in civil society itself. The aim then becomes the strengthening of civic behaviour and civic organization to bring forth changes in local, national and global societies.

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giving the poor something they lack – a school, medical treatment, advice on setting up a business – instead of helping them to find their own way.

According to the Indian grassroots activist Rajesh Tandon, this state-driven development thinking leads to 'externally designed, expert driven, universal policies and programmes that expect passive consumption by ordinary folk. The poor (and other citizens) became "helpless beneficiaries".'

CDC: What's new?

It was a mixed group that came together for the first time in January at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS) in The Hague. Each of the eight core members of the CDC Initiative comes from a different background, political tradition and school of thought, including history, futurism, democratization, (neo)liberal and critical theory, theology, feminism, complexity thinking and systems theory. It is not easy to get such a varied group to agree. So it was hardly surprising that, after a long day of exchanging ideas, people started frowning and walking impatiently around the room.

This wide variety of backgrounds is a major difference between this and other initiatives – and perhaps also its strength. In addition to their intellectual qualities, all members enjoy considerable support in their own countries or represent a viewpoint that many people share. They are public intellectuals who are operating on the cutting edge of science and activism, with broad international networks. Yet they also have a strong affinity with the reality of everyday problems and challenges facing people throughout the world. They are looking for fundamentally new perspectives on the struggle for social and political change in the world, seeking a coherent and well thought out alternative for the two globally prevalent views on development: one based on the state, the other on the market.

During the discussion and workshops something of a consensus gradually formed within the group, but

significant differences of opinion remained. The eight members concluded that what made the initiative innovative was the way in which existing concepts, ideas and practices were redefined, and more especially linked together in new ways. The members decided they would each write an essay, ideally one that referred to the others in the group. The first drafts were discussed in May, by the core participants as well as a larger group of about 30 experts from around the world. Throughout the summer, the essays were feverishly modified and edited and, after initiators Fowler and Biekart had added an introduction and a concluding chapter, the full collection will be published in October on the ISS website and later in book form.

The collection of essays is only one step, a trigger for a debate that still has to gain momentum. Yet it is already possible to distil a number of concepts from the texts and the long discussions in the core group that could become part of a new narrative, a different view of change in the world, with self-determination by citizens at its core.

Co-creating democracy

An important aspect of a new CDC narrative, which is referred to literally or implicitly in many of the essays, is '*re-inventing politics*' or '*deepening of democracy*'. In his essay, Harry Boyte quotes Mamphela Ramphele, one of the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, as saying, 'people have to become the agents of their own development'. This implies, according to Boyte, 'a radical shift of meanings from the citizen as a rights-bearing individual whose highest act is voting and demanding government be held accountable to *the citizen as the co-creator of a democratic society* and government as a catalyst.

An important element in such a deepened democracy is '*self direction*'. People and communities act based on their own values and interests – not only to satisfy their material desires but collectively and for the common good. Because of this self-direction, intellectuals and external experts acquire a different role. Instead of advising and helping, they serve local communities, especially by acting as catalysts for CDC processes. And perhaps they promote horizontal exchange between all the local CDC activities that are already taking place.

Another aspect of deepened democracy is the construction of places and processes where differences engage rather than collide. Multi-stakeholder forums and mediated events are examples, as are the WSF and other regional and national social forums that try to advance radical, horizontal democracy. According to Teivo Teivainen, who was closely involved in organizing the WSF, 'as compared to previous transnational alliances seeking radical change of the world system, such as the early trade-union-based movements or communist-party-based internationals, many of today's globalization protest movements seem to take more seriously the idea that democratic change needs to be generated through democratic forms of action. … Among today's activists, especially but not only within movements considered autonomist or anarchist, Mahatma Gandhi's claim that "we must be the change we want to see in the world" has gained renewed importance'.

Building alternatives

Strengthening civic power in relation to the state and the market is another important element in the evolving CDC narrative. Having absolute faith in the state as the best and sole supplier of services to the public is naïve. The state not only serves the public, but must respond to greater forces as well. It may sometimes be compelled by the global economic system or international power relations to act against the immediate interests of its citizens.

Rajesh Tandon cites the example of the Marxist government of the Indian state of West Bengal, which gave the order to open fire on unarmed demonstrators in the city of Nandigram. The victims were members of a people's committee that was opposed to the compulsory relocation of farmers to allow for the establishment of a Special Economic Zone. The zone offered large tax incentives and a minimum of protection for labour – the archetypical symbol of unbridled capitalism.

Strengthening civic power must however *go further than just countervailing power*, the power to challenge the established order; citizens have a *responsibility to work together to come up with alternatives themselves*, without relieving the state of its own responsibilities. 'We have to go from saying no to saying yes', says Paul Graham, director of IDASA in South Africa and one of the reviewers of the core group's essays together with Kumi Naidoo, Lenka Setkova and Nijala Gopal Jayal. 'We have to move from a culture of resistance to a culture of construction'.

That is also the crucial difference between anti-globalists and alter-globalists. The former owe their existence to a much more powerful opponent: the state, the global market, the elite, the multinationals. Until now, many success stories of civic action have been 'narratives of protest and resistance', writes Tandon. Much CDC takes the form of protest against the fact that 'contemporary neoliberal and statist paradigms are perpetuating the forces of marginalization, exploitation and exclusion'.

By contrast, Tandon proposes that civic agency as such has its own intrinsic value for public good; the 'primacy of civic driven change' means the 'co-creation' of solutions for collective well-being which can't or won't be provided by the state or the market. CDC means believing in one's own strength and building up joint power.

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CDC is normative

Civic driven change has been compared to economist William Easterly's plea for 'seekers' instead of 'planners'. But Easterly scarcely elaborates the notion of 'seeking', leaving it to the free play of market forces and thereby degrading the individual to an economic animal primarily concerned with material gain. CDC is on the contrary '*unashamedly normative*', in the words of Fowler and Biekart. The central concept in that normative process, to distinguish CDC from all kinds of 'uncivic and undemocratic agency', is '*inclusion*'. In a sense this term is an extension of the radical democratic thinking that underpins CDC, because struggles for inclusion – for participation, equality, access – are being fought everywhere: in the state, the market, families, businesses, political parties, NGOs and civil society. Inclusion means *respecting those who are different*. It also means a *concern for the 'whole' of society* over time and at different scales of knowledge and action, from immediate and physically proximate to inter-generational and ecologically global.

Although there are a number of general criteria for what 'civic behaviour' entails, who determines at a more concrete level what is 'civic' and what is 'uncivic'? That question is addressed by Nilda Bullain. In her essay, Bullain writes, 'Civic action is not good in itself. Very often, civic action is based on values that are unacceptable in a democracy – racism, sexism, chauvinism, segregation, violence'. She has seen this herself in recent Eastern European and Balkan history.

Others in the CDC group may think action based on such values is uncivic, but on the other hand these are very real personal points of view that drive people and communities. Who determines what is right and wrong? Bullain cites a number of examples in which the value of political events is attributed differently by various observers.

Can or should international development set a standard for what is civic and what is uncivic? Bullain thinks so. 'We all have a moral right to determine what we believe is good or bad for society… we should then, however, do away with the pretence of "respecting the local culture" and "not

Evelina Dagnino (Brazil) is a professor of political science at the State University of Campinas (Unicamp), Brazil. She has a PhD in political science from Stanford University, USA. She has been a visiting professor at Yale University, US, and Göteborg, Sweden.

Shirin Rai (India) is a professor in the department of Politics and International Studies (PAIS) at the University of Warwick, UK. She studied at the University of Delhi (India) and Cambridge University (UK) and joined PAIS in 1989. She is the author of *Rethinking Empowerment*.

Rakesh Rajani (Tanzania) is a fellow of the Harvard Global Equity Initiative, USA. He studied philosophy, English and American literature at Brandeis University. He is the founder and executive director of HakiElimu in Tanzania.

Harry Boyte (USA) is founder and co-director of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota's Humphrey Institute, USA. He is also co-chair of the Civic Engagement Group of Barack Obama's presidential campaign.

importing foreign models. … If we agree that people should decide by themselves what they see as an ideal way of development, why make any development interventions at all?' Bullain concludes that 'any development intervention … will first need to define what it considers an ideal state and then define the exact values and principles that are the key motivators of that ideal state and which make it possible'.

Quite a dilemma, because this directly opposes the idea that people must decide for themselves, which is the essence of CDC. It also raises the question of when someone is considered a citizen. Is someone a citizen if his or her main political identity – instead of being associated with the national political system of his country – is based on ethnicity or religion, as is very often the case? How can such citizens perform 'civic' action? And, again, who determines what civic action is? Is demanding more autonomy for a specific group an expression of 'civicness', or is it exactly the opposite? The line between civic and uncivic is blurred, as many examples from around the world illustrate.

And are supposedly uncivic means, such as, according to Fowler and Biekart, 'civil disobedience, strikes, boycotts or blockades, to attain more civic, equitable and inclusive outcomes' always uncivic? The answer is somewhat unsatisfactory: it depends on the context. The more unjust the situation, the more 'uncivic' behaviour is legitimate. Altering power means conflict and, sometimes, breaking the law.

Starting from reality

'*Begin "where people are*", not where organizers think they should be', write Biekart and Fowler, elaborating on a number of essays in the compilation. Bolivian communication specialist Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, who replaced Rajani halfway through the CDC process, says that 'definitions of "development" are useless because what is relevant is their translation into practices that affect real lives of people. What we see is what we get'. Instead of allowing outside experts and idealists to determine what is good for people, the determination should be founded on their 'lived reality'.

Individuals usually act on the basis of what concerns them in their personal lives and their immediate surroundings; broader ideals come later. And people's search for solutions to their problems is largely determined by local circumstances, cultures and traditions. Kenyan theologian Philomena Njeri Mwaura points out that in most parts of the world, and certainly in Africa, religion remains a major factor.

Even people who oppose religious institutions have to be aware that individuals *consciously or unconsciously act according to religious norms and values*. Religion (not only modern faiths but also animistic belief systems) is the lens through which many people view the world. It is also how they approach their natural surroundings. Tandon points out that Asiatic and European religious and secular traditions always contain elements of solidarity and include the moral and spiritual motivation to help each other. 'We may have lost sight of it; the rise of individual consumerism and secular-intellectual discourse may have put a thick blanket over it. But it is still there, and with a sensitive touch, can be recovered and reclaimed by all human beings'.

Power mapping

One recurrent message in the essays is that 'everyday politics' are neglected. How do you get something done in the real world? In Teivianen's words, 'If civic-driven global initiatives shy away from tackling political and strategic questions, the changes they may desire are unlikely to take place. … Civic-driven democratization movements, like all others, should have a realist analysis of what is possible and

Philomena Njeri Mwaura (Kenya) is a senior lecturer in religious studies at Kenyatta University, Kenya. She is the Africa region coordinator of the Theology Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).

Nilda Bullain (Hungary) is executive director of the European Center for Not-for-Profit Law (ECNL), Hungary. Previously she was executive director of the Civil Society Development Foundation Hungary (CSDF).

Rajesh Tandon (India) is the founder and chief executive of the Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), a voluntary organization that supports grassroots initiatives in South Asia. Tandon has specialized in social and organizational change.

Alfonso Gumucio Dagron (Bolivia) is a writer, journalist, photographer and development communication specialist. He is managing director for programmes at the Communication for Social Change Consortium, USA.

what is not, and then make strategic prioritizations based on that analysis'. Especially because the focus of power is moving to a transnational level, a locally focused narrative such as CDC must provide an answer.

A first step in this endeavour is to *map the powers in play* and how they are being distributed and used. These powers are explained in the essays as more than formal powers in the political arena or parliament and elections. Power struggles are also fought in the fields of culture, family, community, media, knowledge supply and religion. Power expresses itself not only in formal positions but also in language and discourse. Take, for example, the current global conviction that, in the words of Margaret Thatcher, 'there is no alternative' (to neo-liberalism) and the associated narrative of the End of History. This prevailing view is opposed by the much repeated call, 'another world is possible'.

A *systematic power analysis is a condition for determining adequate strategies* for CDC – for example, to detect 'tipping points', moments at which a certain change suddenly takes hold because of a specific constellation of circumstances. But also, emphasizes Shirin Rai, to be able to estimate the risks that certain actions may create for people at the bottom tier of society. Anyone who really wants to change power relations and challenge established interests is running a serious personal risk. These relations need to be researched at various levels: local, national and global.

Local global

CDC takes place at the local level. And it is also important that the '*local sphere of public discourse and action is reclaimed*' by the people it concerns, according to Tandon. During one of the brainstorming sessions, the concept of 'free spaces' came up. In these spaces the original cultures of a neighbourhood or region and the ethnic or religious identities of the residents must be allowed to develop to their full potential as 'co-creators' of their own environment and future.

However, these local initiatives have to connect to the national and global levels, because those are the spaces in which political and economic processes increasingly take place and which, accordingly, influence the possibilities for change at the local level. CDC initiatives are not imaginary; they are already being performed, all over the world, by thousands of people. But the micro-level changes they bring about are hardly noticed outside their own communities, according to Tandon, who asks, 'Is it because they do not have a systemic impact?' Tandon and other authors endorse Rajani's statement that 'small is no longer beautiful, or effective, or meaningful'. Decisions are made increasingly at the supranational level. Global capital flows, multinationals and international institutions operate way beyond the reach of normal people. That is why local initiatives have to be linked horizontally in a national and even a global network, so that the great gap between local, national and global can be bridged. Otherwise all these initiatives have little impact.

But, Tandon asks, how can we imagine civic driven change as a global driver of deepening democracy without it necessarily operating at global level? And how can we identify this need for upscaling and power formation with the deepening of democracy? In his essay on the internal discussions and dilemmas in the WSF, Teivainen addresses such questions as how to remain democratic and not become entrapped in hierarchical structures? And especially, how should that be combined with the need to act strategically and become a serious power factor that brings us closer to an alternative world order? The WSF was conceived, Teivainen writes, as something that is not a political party, not an NGO, and not a social movement. 'One of the most important concepts that the initiators of the WSF process have used to describe it is "open space"'.

Teivo Teivainen (Finland) is professor of world politics at the University of Helsinki, and director of the programme on Democracy and Global Transformation, San Marcos University, Peru. He has authored several books on democratization processes.

Kees Biekart (the Netherlands) is a senior lecturer in political sociology at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), the Netherlands, and Convenor of the MA specialization Politics of Alternative Development (PAD).

Alan Fowler (UK) is a professor at the Centre of Civil Society of the University of KwaZula Natal, South Africa, and professor of 'civil society' at ISS, the Netherlands. He has been active for over 25 years in international development.

Fons van der Velden (the Netherlands) has facilitated the CDC Initiative. He is facilitator of learning processes and organizational change. He is director of Context, international cooperation, Utrecht, the Netherlands.

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This was the strength of the WSF, and its weakness. 'This democratic co-existence in the open spaces created by the movements has been refreshing and empowering. At the same time, its relativistic undertones can become frustrating for the task of devising effective strategies to change the world'.

Difficult dilemmas, but what is clear is that they won't be solved by copying old concepts of state-centred politics. It is not a matter of creating a 'world government' or global political parties. It is learning by doing; it is experimenting. There is an urgent need for alternative concepts. According to Teivianen, the formulation of 'models of transnational, cosmopolitan or global democratic institutions of the future can provide inspiration for those who might struggle for their realization. Such models are also important for the task of undermining the existing networks of power, because the legitimacy of the latter has been largely based on the there-is-no-alternative discourse'.

Biekart and Fowler describe in their concluding essay as a 'guiding philosophy for CDC' one where the 'co-responsibilities for sustaining the global commons for everyone stand central'. This as an alternative for the current 'over-reliance on economic growth that emphasizes accumulation over distribution and a moral and practical failure of (market-driven) party politics and democracy on many scales' which feeds 'instability and ... disempowers citizens as agents in charge of their own development'.

Practical implications

Concrete strategies and instruments are needed to put CDC into practice. One important element, according to Alfonso Gumucio Dagron, is communication, which he distinguishes from information. Providing information is a one-way and top-down process. Communication, on the other hand, means that power will be shared. *Communication enables citizens to take part in decision-making processes.* Communication is also a crucial aspect in the translation of civic involvement into collective action for change. Instead of vertical flows of information, communication is about horizontal exchange and dialogue. *Communication connects people* and the hundreds of small CDC initiatives that take place at the local level, for example through the use of ICT but also through the active involvement of 'communicators': one of the roles NGOs can play.

Similarly, Harry Boyte reflects on the roles that NGOs and professionals can play by using the dichotomy between 'mobilizing' (top-down) and 'organizing' (horizontal). Mobilizing assumes the existence of an 'enemy' and a problem defined in advance against which activists try to persuade people to take action. Community organizing on the other hand means building up organizations and developing skills so that people can define their own problems – Boyte presents a lot of examples from the US in the 1930s and from South Africa in more recent times – and learn to analyze the power relations in their own environments.

'What do we do on Monday morning'? is the very practical question Fowler and Biekart try to answer in their concluding essay, trying to define some concrete applications of these abstract ideas for private development organizations. Although they do provide some instruments and preliminary answers, it is much too early to draw any far-reaching conclusions from these main aspects that have emerged so far from the CDC Initiative. The essays and debates are intended only as a starting point for the discussion that will now hopefully develop. A first step was taken with the publication of the essays in October. *The Broker* calls on readers to respond. The debate will be followed up in the coming issues and on the website. ■

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Readers can read and add comments on this article at **www.thebrokeronline.eu.**

For more information, visit **www.iss.nl/cdc**.

Child labour versus child work

All work and no play

The struggle against child labour is showing results. But the consensus is now being attacked from two sides: abolish all child labour versus there is nothing wrong with child work.

Child labour policies remain high on the development agenda. Most major NGOs in the West have policies on and support projects related to child labour in developing countries. There is increasing focus on the issue in corporate social responsibility discussions prompted by activist groups that have launched campaigns boycotting products manufactured by children. Multinational corporations have become very sensitive to the presence of child labourers in their production chains. Even governments get entangled in consumer boycotts. In June 2008 the EC adopted a proposal initiated by the Dutch government to study the possibility of using trade-related measures against import products manufactured by child labourers.

A steady decline

In many developing countries, children account for one third to one half of the population. They should all be able to attend school and enjoy a proper childhood, as those born to wealthier families are more likely to do. Many studies have shown that child labour is mainly a problem for poor, vulnerable and crisis-stricken families in the most impoverished countries.

There has been progress in the struggle against child labour. The International Labour Organization (ILO) has been particularly active in establishing an international standard to create a worldwide understanding of what child labour is and which forms of it need to be abolished. Within the ILO, the International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) and the Statistical Information Monitoring Programme on Child Labour (SIMPOC) have produced a vast array of country-wide data and studies. These have provided important indicators of the issues involved and of the progress that has been made.

By **Kristoffel Lieten,** Child Labour Studies chair at the University of Amsterdam and the International Institute of Social History in Amsterdam.

Summary

- Overall, there has been a steady decline in child labour.
- Consumer boycotts have had mixed effects.
- The ILO and many NGOs argue that all child labour should be abolished.
- Some scholars and some NGOs talk in terms of 'child work': the *protagonistas*. Governments should introduce measures that secure the right of children to work and then protect the working child.

In its latest global report on child labour, the ILO announced that 'the end of child labour is within reach'. It calculated that the total number of child labourers had fallen by 11%, to 218 million, between 2000 and 2004. This figure includes all working children, even those in the 14–17 age range who are doing harmful work. The incidence of children in the so-called 'worst forms' of labour has witnessed an even sharper decline. It dropped by 26% to 126 million; 74 million children below 14 years are involved in the worst forms of child labour.

Overall there has been an unmistakable decline in child labour. However in some countries it has only been slight and in other countries conditions have worsened. Consumer boycotts may have been one of the factors in this decline, but labourers in export-oriented industries are only a small segment of the total child labour force. The problem remains serious in South Asia and in sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty and malfunctioning education systems force millions of children into labour.

Negative effects

Consumer boycotts in specific cases may have had negative effects. Boycotts destroy the livelihoods of working children without providing alternative sources of income. What happens to child labourers who are sacked from their workplaces in the wake of a consumer boycott or because of restrictions imposed by Western governments? Unfortunately many children end up in worse conditions after losing >

Hollandse Hoogte / Giulio Di Sturco

India has the largest child labour force in the world. Efforts are being made to send them to school.

their jobs. This is one of the reasons why mainstream organizations have pleaded for a more balanced and contextual approach that involves all the partners in the field.

However, the boycott campaigns have indirectly helped raise awareness of the child labour issue. Economic development, technological changes, a better educational infrastructure, government policy initiatives and the gradual changing of the standards in civil society have all played a part. Globalization may also be helping, not due to improving economic conditions, but because of the dissemination of a new childhood standard across the globe.

One effect of the ILO Convention 182, adopted in 1999, is that official sanction has been given to the idea that not all work done by children needs to be eradicated. Not all the work children perform is necessarily negative. In reality, children can do a variety of jobs under widely divergent conditions.

Child labour takes place along a continuum. At one end, it is beneficial and promotes or enhances a child's physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development without interfering with school, recreation or rest. At the other extreme, the work is destructive and exploitative. A more precise delineation of what child labour is can be determined by a combination of Convention 138 (setting the age standards) and Convention 182 (setting the harm standards). This is the general line along which governments have been working.

Disagreements

Not everyone accepts this distinction. Some scholars and NGOs claim that nothing is wrong with child labour. They actually avoid using the term and instead talk in terms of 'child work'. Governments, rather than taking measures against child labour, should introduce measures that secure the right of children to work and then protect the working child.

Over the last decade an international movement has emerged that opposes the eradication of child labour. The International Movement of Working Children consists of several national networks of working children organizations

from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe. 'Yes to Child Work, No to Exploitation' is their slogan.

According to Manfred Liebel, one of the ideologues behind this movement, children should be regarded as independent individuals who can judge and design their lives themselves. This idea of participation in the Latin American context is referred to as *protagonismo*. It refers to the capacity to participate in society and to transform it. Liebel argues that the ILO 'is deaf to the concrete interests of working children' and 'should be recommended to ask exactly what could help to improve the situation of these children – while actually listening to working children and their organizations, and beginning a serious dialogue marked by mutual respect'.

The ILO focuses on the worst forms of child labour in combination with Convention 138. Some organizations and alliances consider this a soft and compromising option. They argue that all forms of child labour should be abolished on a priority basis. Organizations and action committees, such as Stop Child Labour Now, regard all forms of work done by children as child labour. They also consider any child who is not in school to be a child labourer.

In the case of India, for example, Stop Child Labour Now has come up with a figure of between 50 million and 100 million child labourers, much higher than the official figure of 11 million. The organization also argues that child labour is far more a cause than an effect of poverty, and that it can be eradicated without ending poverty first. Getting all children into school is their approach, and as such they reject the prioritization of the worst forms. The organization advocates that, instead, the ILO should address the elimination of all forms of child labour. The focus on worst forms is bad policy 'leading to piecemeal *ad hoc* solutions and creating an obstacle to a sustainable comprehensive strategy towards the elimination of all forms of child labour'.

The International Labour Organization

The ILO is a tripartite organization, representing government, trade unions and employers. It relies on national governments to implement its recommendations.

The ILO has agreed on two conventions, which are widely accepted. The so-called Minimum Age Convention (No. 138), adopted in 1973, requires states to design and apply national policies to set a minimum age for admission to employment. In developing countries, children below the age of 12 are not allowed to work. Children below the age of 14 are allowed to be engaged only in light labour, but this is restricted in time and levels of harm.

In 1999, Convention 182, the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention, was agreed on after many years of negotiations. This convention explicitly calls for the immediate prohibition and elimination of those forms of child labour which 'by the nature or circumstances in which it is carried out is likely to harm the health, safety or morals of children'. It also calls for effective and time-bound measures to ensure access to free basic education. Around 160 countries have ratified this convention and many NGOs have been encouraged to launch their own projects to ban child labour.

Complicated practice

There has been a lot of progress in the struggle against child labour. Above all, a normative framework has been established that sets an international standard for policy making and monitoring.

This framework is under contention. It is considered too soft by some because it does not address all forms of child labour, and too strict by others. Quite often, however, discussions are conducted within the confines of a paradigmatic understanding. Ideological positions tend to keep reality at length.

For example, a recent study of the child labour organizations in a number of countries concluded that the children usually did not fall under the child labour definition of the ILO. They did only light work if they did any work at all, and by and large were adolescents.

On the other hand, organizations that are against child labour and in favour of universal elementary education, such as Plan International, Terre des Hommes and even the ILO in some cases, have been intervening in such a way that the children can continue working while getting some measure of education and protection. Given the financial constraints, it is as far as one can go.

Policies are in place, financial resources are available and public opinion is sensitive to the issue. Yet the problem continues. Ending child labour and achieving universal primary education is the target, but it remains elusive in an environment of deprivation and unfathomable misery. ■

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Readers can read and add comments on this article at **www.thebrokeronline.eu.**

Bucking the aid trend

This second article in a series looking at development in European countries focuses on Ireland, which is becoming a major and much-lauded player in development. Yet there are doubts within the domestic aid community about the direction of policy and the management of rapid growth.

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Ireland is a late starter in the field of international aid, but it is rapidly catching up with other Western donors. While the aid budgets of many countries have contracted in recent years, Ireland has applied some of the fruits of its 15-year economic boom to increasing aid spending. It is now the sixth most generous donor in the world. If Ireland maintains its current rate of progress, it could reach the UN target of allocating 0.7% of GNP to aid by 2012.

Even before the recent increases in its aid budget, Ireland was punching above its weight in the development world. This was the result of its government's involvement with various peace and disarmament initiatives, the work of Irish peacekeepers with the UN and the advocacy of prominent Irish celebrities such as Bono and Sir Bob Geldof. Ireland also has a distinguished tradition in the related field of human rights through the contributions of Nobel Peace Prize winner Sean MacBride and former Irish president and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Mary Robinson.

However, the Irish economy has recently begun to stall, prompting fears that, a recession could mean a reduction in the aid budget. This worry is underpinned by ongoing concerns about the level of public support for the country's aid programme, Irish Aid, which continues to suffer from a lack of visibility and the corrosive effects of a long-running public debate on aid and corruption.

In September 2008, the junior minister responsible for the aid budget, Peter Power, said the government remained on course to meet the UN target. However, the budget in October will reveal whether politicians are putting their money where their mouth is.

By **Paul Cullen**, a journalist with *The Irish Times* since 1993 and author of books on asylum seekers and refugees in Ireland and on political corruption.

Summary

- Because of its economic boom, Ireland is now struggling to manage a fast growing aid budget.
- Budget support to corrupt African governments fuels heated public debate.
- The DAC praises Ireland for its poverty focus and commitment to partnership principles.

Ireland has no colonial past. It remained inward-looking for much of the 20th century and had no obvious links to countries in the developing world. The main exception was the missionary tradition forged by thousands of Catholic priests, nuns and brothers who were for several centuries despatched by their church to all parts of the globe. Over time, many of these missionaries began doing development and relief work in the communities where they lived. Today, this tradition is tapering off. However, there are still over 2000 Irish missionaries, largely elderly, working in the developing world.

In the late 1960s the Nigerian civil war was arguably the first crisis in the developing world to have impacted the Irish consciousness. A congregation of priests and brothers called the Holy Ghost Fathers were working in Biafra and sided with the secessionists. The Fathers played a key role in increasing international support for the Biafran cause. They also helped found Africa Concern in response to the ensuing famine; this organization was later renamed Concern and is today the largest Irish development NGO.

Aiming for the target – again

Ireland's aid programme was established in 1974, but it remained modest in size for many years. As late as 1994, Ireland was still spending less than €100 million a year on aid, a fraction of what it was receiving from the EU in structural funds. In 2000 the government made the bold promise to reach the UN aid target of 0.7% of GNP by 2007, but reneged on this commitment several years later. However, the

ANP/David de la Paz

Mary Robinson, former President of Ireland (1990-1997) and former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (1997-2002), talks at AIDS 2008, the 12th International AIDS conference in Mexico

goal enjoyed wide public and political support. 'The 0.7% target has been a headline issue for some years and it is clear the mobilization of civil society around it has had a lasting effect', says Peadar Kirby of the University of Limerick.

In 2005, then Taoiseach (prime minister) Bertie Ahern promised to reach the UN target by 2012. The following year, for the first time, Ireland gave more in overseas aid than it received in financial support from the EU. The country reached an interim target of 0.5% in 2007, but a subsequent downturn in the domestic economy is likely to test the sincerity of the political promises that have been made.

Development aid gives Ireland an international profile it wouldn't otherwise enjoy, according to Hans Zomer, head of Dóchas, the umbrella body for development NGOs. 'There's a lot of talk about our charity and generosity, but really we should be talking in terms of our moral obligation to developing countries', Zomer says.

Untied aid for Africa

Irish Aid is a division of the Department of Foreign Affairs headed by a junior minister (minister of state) for development cooperation who answers to the minister for foreign affairs. For many years the aid programme was considered the Cinderella of the Irish foreign service, but its budget now greatly exceeds that of the diplomatic corps.

Roughly one-third of the Irish Aid budget is allocated to programme countries and another third goes to international organizations such as the UN and EU. The remaining third is spent on other forms of aid, such as the €140 million spent on humanitarian crises in 2007.

Poverty reduction is the core focus of Irish Aid. About 80% of the support goes to Africa. There are seven so-called programme countries in sub-Saharan Africa and two in Asia.

According to a 2007 report prepared for Dóchas, the amount of the overall budget spent on education and agriculture is declining, while it is rising for health and government/civil society. Ireland allocates far more funding to health than other donors – 20% of the budget compared to the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) average of 3.8% – and more still to NGOs. Only 4% of the budget is spent on administration – down from 9% a decade ago.

Irish Aid is well regarded internationally. The DAC 2003 report was glowing, saying the Irish programme 'distinguished itself by its sharp focus on poverty reduction and its commitment to partnership principles'. The next DAC review of the programme began in September 2008.

Managing growth

Staffing levels are a persistent cause of concern for Irish Aid. According to Dóchas, the relocation of the programme from Dublin to Limerick has led to the departure of large numbers of experienced staff. 'At the present time, many positions remain vacant, while others are held by staff with little or no professional experience in the development cooperation field'. Dóchas also blames this relocation for 'a noticeable worsening of internal communications' in Irish Aid.

Frequent name changes have also damaged the visibility of the programme (Ireland Aid became Development Cooperation Ireland and then Irish Aid). Now Irish Aid spends increasing sums on the promotion of its own work and on encouraging development-related coverage in the media. It recently opened a prominently located information and volunteering centre in Dublin. Zomer says Irish Aid is 'getting better at promoting their message', though there is no current research to indicate whether public perceptions have changed since the 1990s, when surveys showed widespread ignorance of Ireland's work in development.

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Ireland and UN peacekeeping

Since 1958, just three years after it joined the United Nations, Ireland has been supplying peacekeeping troops to the UN. Irish soldiers have worn the UN helmet in Lebanon, the Congo, Namibia, East Timor, Cyprus, Liberia and many other missions, most recently in Chad. Dozens of Irish troops have died in this foreign service.

For many years, UN peacekeeping service was the main and, arguably, only facet of Ireland's foreign policy. The fall of the Berlin Wall and the resulting changes in the balance of world power have created a more complex environment in which Irish troops must operate. The growing emphasis on peace enforcement rather than peacekeeping and the increasing EU involvement in overseas operations have posed challenges for neutral Ireland. Neutrality as a core policy has been reaffirmed, but the previous consensus supporting international missions has been fractured as Irish troops become increasingly involved in peace enforcing operations and EU battle groups.

Public debate on the issue has been limited, however, and most interest centres on the potential threat to Irish soldiers serving in difficult environments such as Liberia or Chad. Neither has the debate about neutrality and peacekeeping become enmeshed with that on development to any great extent, although that is starting to change. Aid agencies, for example, have raised concerns with Irish Aid about the latter's draft emergency relief policy, which promises to provide greater support for military activities. They are also unhappy that the Irish military mission in Chad is consistently and wrongly referred to as 'humanitarian'.

The Evaluation and Audit unit of Irish Aid conducts regular visits to programme countries. But in many cases Irish Aid has refused to make the reports of these visits public. In denying a request from a journalist to publish seven such reports earlier this year, Irish Aid claimed that sharing the information could be detrimental to the programme and to Ireland's relations with partner governments, international organizations and other donor countries.

This stance appears to go against the commitment to openness and accountability expressed in the programme's white paper, and prompted Dr Eamonn Brehony of the Kimmage Development Studies Centre in Dublin to conclude that the report's findings must be so negative that they cannot be shared with Irish taxpayers. Kirby believes the issue of aid effectiveness is not being examined with the necessary rigour. 'They're struggling very much to manage a fast increasing aid budget. My sense is that they're desperate to spend money'.

Trade talks, development listens

With a minuscule army and only nascent industrial strength internationally, Ireland has less potential than other countries for conflicts between its development policy and other areas of government. It has not been a significant banker in global terms, so it has few debts to forgive. Until the early 1990s, it was traditionally a country of emigration rather than immigration, but since then a relatively large number of asylum seekers and other migrants have entered the country.

The greatest potential for conflict with development goals exists in the area of agriculture. As Kirby points out, Ireland and France, with their strong farming lobbies, form the backbone of resistance to concessions being made in international trade talks. The potential for conflict here is obvious. 'By international standards, we're quite good when it comes to coherence across Irish Aid. We're bad on development and agricultural subsidies, but then everyone is bad on this', Kirby says.

The government responded to the coherence issue in 2007 by setting up an inter-departmental committee on development involving five departments, but there is no evidence yet that this body has had a significant impact on official policy.

The corruption debate

The Irish Aid budget has continued to grow despite a long-running and heated public debate about corruption. Critics have zeroed in on the Irish government's channelling of aid monies directly to African governments or to specific sectors of African economies. Direct budget support is given to two states – Tanzania and Mozambique – while in other priority countries aid is channelled through departments of the recipient government by way of sectoral support, where funds can only be used for specified projects. According to Irish Aid's 2007 annual report, 14% of the €870 million in the budget went directly to the governments of Ireland's nine programme countries.

Although many other Western donors follow the same approach, the direct support for African governments has unleashed a series of furious attacks led by John O'Shea, the head of Goal, one of the country's largest development NGOs. Goal is a substantial recipient of funding from Irish Aid and it operates in many of the African countries that are the subject of his criticism. O'Shea believes that corruption and poverty remain the 'defining features' of Africa, even after decades of aid. He claims that Ireland, through government-to-government aid, pours hundreds of millions into this 'bottomless pit' every year.

Columnist David Adams says the fact that so many of Ireland's priority countries for aid rank so low on Transparency International's anti-corruption index 'should raise real concerns about the amount of Irish Aid actually reaching the unfortunate people for whom it is intended'. In response, the government, Irish Aid and many others in the aid community have argued that aid is closely monitored and audited and that withdrawing aid from 'dislikeable regimes' hits the poor most of all.

Former minister for foreign affairs Dermot Ahern has rejected O'Shea's claim that the government is handing 'blank cheques' to corrupt regimes as 'wholly without foundation'. All its aid was subject to the closest possible scrutiny and no partner government was free to spend 'one cent' of Irish Aid money in whatever way it pleased.

'NGOs are doing marvellous work in the developing world, but neither NGOs nor donors can ever replace governments', says another former aid minister, Conor Lenihan. 'Building a strong education system is better than building a single school. Building a strong health system is better than building a single clinic. That can only be done by working with governments'.

The government has responded to the pressure by tweaking its aid to various countries, while holding generally to the

provision of government-to-government aid as one part of the aid mix. In February 2008, for example, the aid minister opted not to increase budget support for Mozambique, in spite of a recommendation to this effect made in an independent review of the aid programme. The same review noted that corruption in the southern African state was endemic.

In 2006 the government lopped €3 million off its aid to Uganda to signal its concern about the pace of democratic reform there. The same year, €10 million in direct budget support to the Kampala administration was diverted to non-government channels.

Trade and aid

This year, Adams broadened his attack on the aid programme. Questioning the claim that Irish Aid is not tied to trade, he noted the heavy business emphasis during a recent visit by the Taoiseach to South Africa. 'Everything from Irish meat, butter and "deep-dug" peat to IT and communications systems was sold by the Irish delegation, yet they bought nothing'.

There is, he writes, something 'distinctly exploitative' about the 'one-way' traffic in trade between Ireland and aid-recipient countries. 'If the government cares as much about the plight of Africa as it claims, then instead of dutifully following the closed-market, protectionist policies of the EU, it should be fighting tooth and nail to have them lifted. While trade barriers remain in place, EU members donating aid to Africa is the equivalent of them throwing conscience-salving scraps from the top table of an exclusive club to those they keep locked outside the door'.

Historically, Irish business has had few links with the developing world (there are exceptions such as the fruit importer Fyffes, the packaging company Smurfits and various mining outfits) and little involvement in the aid programme. That is now changing, with the growth of the Irish economy and official encouragement for more private sector involvement in aid. Business itself seems anxious to get involved; earlier this year, for example, entrepreneur Niall Mellon, who runs a house-building charity in South Africa, made a strong plea to this effect and contrasted this approach to the use of taxpayers' money in 'anonymous UN funds'. Whether this trend ultimately leads to a diminution in the untied nature of Irish Aid remains to be seen.

Future initiatives

Irish Aid was the subject of a major review in 2002 and a white paper in 2006. The latter document, while containing few surprises, proposed a number of initiatives as well as new oversight mechanisms to ensure Irish aid is well spent and is not subject to corruption. These included a dedicated unit for conflict analysis and resolution to be established in the Department of Foreign Affairs, a hunger task force and a rapid response initiative, to include a roster of highly skilled people for deployment to emergency situations and disaster as they occur. The latter initiative has prompted some commentators to wonder if Irish Aid isn't duplicating work already being done by some of the NGOs. The hunger task force includes such luminaries as Jeffrey Sachs of Colombia University and singer Bono, and is expected to report shortly.

Academic hubs on development

Ireland has few of the think-tanks and academic hubs on development that are found in many other donor countries, although academic activity has recently increased.

Kimmage Development Studies Centre in Dublin, which was founded by the Holy Ghost Fathers in 1974, is the oldest academic institution specializing in education and training courses for development professionals.

The Centre for Development Studies in University College Dublin (UCD) is also long established, though small. In Trinity College Dublin, the Institute of International Integration Studies was established in 2002, is a research oriented body focusing on aspects of global and regional integration.

The Irish Centre for Human Rights, which is dedicated to the study of human rights and humanitarian law, has been based in the National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG) since its foundation in 2000.

Irish Aid plans to spend €20 million over five years on collaborative research and partnerships between Irish higher education institutions and developing countries. Since 2003, Irish Aid's advisory board has spent over €3 million on research projects involving over 100 researchers at institutions in Ireland, other European countries and Africa.

The future, like the recent past, looks like being dominated by the challenge of reaching the UN aid target. When asked about the government's plans to this end, the new aid minister, Peter Power was cryptic. 'The aid budget reflects the level of economic activity in a country, and this has stagnated recently. It's a meaningless budget if our economy isn't sound and robust. It's important we take whatever steps are necessary to sustain an economy that can provide the aid programme we want'.

It is possible that the aid budget could be subjected to cuts and yet still make progress towards the goal. Because the target is related to GNP, it gets easier to attain in a shrinking economy.

The general view in the aid community is that the target will be reached but, based on previous form, you can't help wondering. ■

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A longer version of this article, with notes and references, can be found at www.thebrokeronline.eu.

Researchers must map the world

What are the dilemmas facing practitioners in the field of international cooperation? How can researchers help resolve them? Koos Richelle, head of EuropeAid, wants researchers to deliver more accurate analyses of what is happening in the developing world in order to build more realistic European policies.

Koos Richelle (EuropeAid)
Koos Richelle has been director-general of EuropeAid since 2004. Before that – after an extensive career in The Hague, of which five years as head of the Dutch development programme (DGIS) – he was Brussels' first man in DG Development for three years.

What does EuropeAid do?
EuropeAid is the directorate-general of the European Commission responsible for implementing aid programmes and projects across the world. EuropeAid works according to EU strategies for the delivery of aid that are designed by other directorates-general, including DG Development for the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries and DG External Relations for other regions of the world Humanitarian aid is managed by a separate directorate-general, called ECHO. The work EuropeAid does contributes significantly to the development objectives of the EU (as formulated in the European Consensus on Development) and to the United Nations' Millennium Development Goals. The European Union is the world's biggest aid donor.

How do research and practice relate at the European level?
A great deal of development research commissioned by the EU is never put into practice. Sometimes this is because the research is too general, and therefore hard to apply, but there is also a tendency in development cooperation to hop from one trendy issue to the next. Focusing on the most-hyped issue leaves no time or space for discussing other relevant research findings. Last year trade, climate change and food security swiftly succeeded each other as the subjects meriting all donor attention. Timing is a key factor. By the time research results are available, the examined issue is often no longer topical. Thus few people rush to implement the findings. Whenever I take five minutes to think about the return on the EU's investments in development research, I start to feel rather despondent.

I dare say that development cooperation is only to a very limited extent based on scientific insights. An abundance of research is done, but there is a noncommittal attitude toward implementing the findings. For example, studies on why

there are Asian but no African economic 'tigers' could fill a library. These studies have found that land and property rights are a factor. And although plenty of studies provide theoretical and even practical frameworks for understanding the politics of land use, there has been very little concrete action in response.

There are plenty more examples. For instance, more than a decade ago World Bank research showed that 25% of all international aid was wasted because it was tied to all sorts of donor conditions. It took a long time before political consequences were attached to this insight. Today, there are binding agreements within the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) about untying most of the aid to the least developed countries. Yet, if we are to believe the World Bank, during this decade spent on discussion and political decision making 25% of all donor money was squandered.

Of course we pick up on certain findings incidentally, but there is no systematic handling of research results to speak of that benefits the Brussels policy process. The institutional setting also plays a part in this. The primary responsibility for development research lies with DG Research. As DG EuropeAid we are of course involved, but rarely are we responsible for initiating or financing the research or for translating its results into policy – these things are often up to the governments of developing countries. As a consequence, our people feel little natural ownership of these research projects.

What should researchers focus on more?

First, what needs improvement is what I call 'mapping'. I like to let facts and figures speak for themselves. We often lack an overall picture of what is going on in a specific developing country. Partly this is because the statistical base is rather weak in most of these countries. Comprehensive household surveys are seldom conducted. But we also lack insight into basic yet crucial questions, such as which are the areas with economic potential, what is good and what is bad in terms of a country's infrastructure, which population groups are in acute shortage of clean drinking water and which have the most dire need of healthcare? How much money is available for all of this, both in terms of donor funds and in terms of the government's national budget? Because we lack such information, much of our policy is built on quicksand. By conducting more and better preparatory research, we make our policies more realistic. Mapping entails more than making satellite snapshots. It is about bringing information together and engaging in policy-relevant interpretation.

Second, there is a need for applied economic research in the areas of infrastructure and public-private partnerships. Take the issue of 'cost recovery' for energy. We know that theoretically a great deal is possible with hydroelectric power stations in Africa. But how can we learn to combine investments and gifts in such a way that the poorer segments of a population are also well served? I would love to see an economic model explaining that. Research should be able to tell us how we can design and implement bigger interventions that would have a larger impact than the traditional small and dispersed projects. How can we go about 'scaling up' in an environment that is troublesome in terms of good governance and that presents us with problems given that we have to serve people who can pay for their energy and at the same time others who will not be able to do so for the foreseeable future. How do you solve that economic dilemma without creating the perverse situation that people get used to free services, which clearly will not be provided forever? We must after all uphold the principle of cost recovery.

I am always looking for practical, applicable models that can stand the political test. We depend too much on interesting stories and well meaning hearts, but what we need are models that can make the developing world go round. ■

The nuances of development

A review of David Mosse's *Cultivating Development*

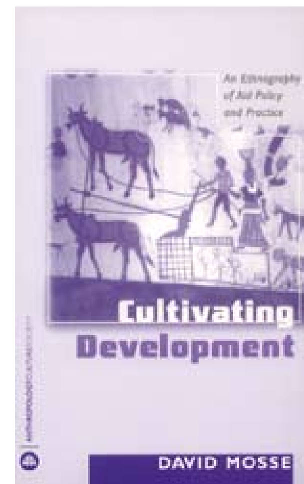
Development today is not a particularly nuanced affair. Its most visible protagonists are 'aid celebrities', such as musician Bono and economist Jeffrey Sachs, who believe that 'ending poverty' can be achieved through 'compassionate consumption' and 'back-to-the-sixties' bulk investments. This situation makes David Mosse's *Cultivating Development* a valuable contribution to the literature, and I highly recommend it to development professionals and academics alike. An outstanding ethnographic account of the Indo-British Rainfed Farming project – a flagship British aid initiative in India – does a splendid job of highlighting contemporary issues surrounding development by contextualizing and critically reflecting on dominant interpretations and practices.

The book is centred on five main propositions. The first argues that development policy – mainly through development interventions and donors – 'primarily functions to mobilize and maintain political support that is to legitimize rather than to orientate practice'. Phrased differently, development policy is an inherently upward-focused tool for maintaining the legitimacy of interventions rather than laying the groundwork for 'grassroots' or 'on-the-ground' implementations.

Mosse subsequently flips the relationship between policy and practice, and demonstrates the second proposition that 'development projects work to maintain themselves as coherent policy ideas or systems of representations'. Proposition three is that those with ideas in fact are 'not driven by policy, but by the exigencies of organizations and the need to maintain relationships'. Mosse argues that discourses become the end, rather than the means, of development because coherent and attractive development discussions create a far better framework for 'maintaining relationships' than contradictory development realities. Mosse's fourth proposition holds that projects 'do not fail' but 'are failed by wider networks of support and validation', which makes success and failure 'policy-oriented judgements that obscure project effects' – proposition five.

This is not to say that development is relative and without impact. Mosse upholds the accepted idea that development projects are renowned for their unintended side effects, but adds that even if desired project effects are achieved, these are only positively acknowledged if they (still) fit into the dominant policy model. For example, Mosse's book shows in detail how the Indo-British Rainfed Farming project in its first phase (1992-1997) was considered 'absolutely cutting edge' and 'the jewel in the crown' of British aid, even though it had little to show for itself in reality. In the second phase, however, when some positive local dynamics were starting to appear, the project no longer fit the changed policy model and began to be regarded as a failure.

Cultivating Development has made a big impact in academic circles and beyond. This was partly triggered by the unusually strong objections to the book made by the subjects of Mosse's research, who were also his colleagues for over ten years in the farming project that is the focus of the book. Mosse used his comparative advantage as participant-insider in the project to develop a 'complex, long-term, multi-sited and initially unintentional' research narrative that captures and ethnographically dissects the inherent struggles and tensions in current



'participatory' development. Few in development dare to openly acknowledge these issues, but rather, as Mosse convincingly shows, try to conceal behind 'the veil of policy'.

This last point is exactly why Mosse's book is a must-read: it discusses the uncomfortable part of development that most practioners know well, namely the feeling that they are continually fashioning discourses and policies that do not reflect the realities they face in projects and local settings. *Cultivating Development* explains why these 'uncomfortable feelings' arise and how they are perpetuated. Mosse has forcefully set the tone for a 'new ethnography of development' that does away with the 'monolithic notions' and naïve views of development so characteristic of contemporary, celebrity-driven development, and instead seeks the nuances of development policy and practice. ■

By **Bram Büscher**, lecturer at the Institute of Social Studies in The Hague and postdoctoral fellow at the University of Johannesburg, South Africa.

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For a longer version of this review visit **www.thebrokeronline.eu**

ICTs for the poor

It is often assumed that information and communication technologies (ICTs) can contribute to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but the evidence for that conclusion is weak. The Building Communication Opportunities (BCO) Alliance has conducted an impact study to assess the effects that radio, mobile phones and internet have on development. It published the results in a 200-page report last June.

The BCO Alliance is an international partnership of eleven agencies working in information, communications and development (ICD). Since 2004, the BCO Alliance has supported projects that are meant to, as they put it, 'unlock the potential' that media and ICTs have for improving the lives of the poor.

The central question of the impact study was how do communications for development contribute to poverty reduction through strengthening the voices, capacities, communications and networking of the poor and the marginalized, and enable them to influence decisions that affect their lives?

For this assessment, an international team of experts conducted three case studies. The first examined the impact of radio on political change. Broadcast radio is not only used to disseminate information about malaria, HIV/AIDS, crops and market prices, but also to inform people of their rights. In Nepal, radio stations played a significant part in nudging public opinion toward favouring a new political order. After 240 years of autocratic rule, the monarchy was this year replaced by more democratic political structures. But radio broadcasts also played a pivotal role in fomenting ethnic violence in Rwanda in 1994. Radio has most influence where it is widely accessible, trusted by listeners and open to inclusive participation.

A second case study confirmed that mobile telephony has the most significant impact on making markets work for the poor. Mobile phones are widely used by farmers, craft workers and fishermen to participate in markets that command higher prices. Still, while small- and medium-sized enterprises benefit from ICTs, the impact of better information resources on micro-businesses is often constrained by shortage of capital and lack of skills.

The final case study looked at the effectiveness of BCO's networking strategies. Networking for advocacy and policy change is a central occupation of many of these agencies, who have worked together to achieve liberalization of broadcasting ownership and reforms in telecommunications policy such as open access and internet rights. The impact study shows that the most effective networks for building communities of activists are those that enable the pooling of resources and expertise. Assessing the impact of advocacy is notoriously difficult. This issue was addressed in a separate investigation into impact assessment in the area of ICD.

The lasting impact of the remarkable changes over the last decade – most households in developing countries now have access to broadcast radio, mobile phones have made telephony available to millions and internet use is spreading – heavily depends on contextual factors. Local social, economic, political and cultural norms play a major part in deciding how radio and other media will exert their influence. An isolated focus on technology is therefore not enough. To be effective, the introduction of ICTs should be integrated into broader development policies. ■

- Go to on *www.bcoalliance.org* for more information.

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Research editor: Ellen Lammers
Editing: Tracy Brown Collins

Research: Chris van der Borgh (conflict), Willemijn Verkoren (civil society)

Editorial Committee: Johan van de Gronden, Erik van Heeswijk, Bram Huijsman, Mirjam Ros-Tonen, Kees Schaepman, Fons van der Velden

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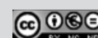

Weak links

Earlier this year, economist Paul Collier visited the Netherlands and talked about the policy recommendations spelled out in his best-selling book *The Bottom Billion*. He flew in from Africa, spent a few hours in the Netherlands, and then was on his way to rescue the Middle East. Recently Jeffrey Sachs and William Easterly – equally high-powered economists – also honoured the Netherlands with a visit, preaching their own version of the economic gospel.

Sachs, Easterly and Collier disagree on many economic issues. But they have in common the fact that their academic careers and reputations as policy advisors are to some extent based on the econometric approach of cross-country regressions.

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The idea is simple: you collect information on a vast number of variables for a wide variety of countries and ask a computer to search for causal relationships. With the extensive datasets that are available on the internet this is easy to do, and it is a fun way to pass a rainy afternoon. A routine application is to 'regress' economic growth on a bunch of variables, including measures of investment, school enrolment, the rule of law and foreign aid. The computer spits out statistical associations almost instantly.

Most economists are well aware of the potential pitfalls of such an approach and take the outcomes with more than a pinch of salt. But non-experts can be easily misled by impressive data that suggest 'hard' and precise results and convey the illusion of absolute truth. The influence that cross-country growth regressions have on policy debate and formulation bears no relation to the shaky foundations on which they are based.

What are the potential problems with cross-country regressions? Most studies are not rooted in theory and are 'open-ended' in terms of the variables that may be included. The 'one-size-fits-all' approach of linear models implies that the link between income (or growth) and the selected variables is the same for all countries. But is it realistic to think the effect of institutions (or an abundance of natural resources) on economic growth is the same in Sudan as it is in Canada or Peru?

Cross-country studies suffer from limited data availability, tend to ignore 'within-country' heterogeneity of variables and generally struggle with the thorny issue of establishing causation. Although documenting correlations between variables is easy enough, it is much more difficult to prove, for example, that good health or secure property rights contribute to high incomes rather than the other way around.

A recent examination of World Bank research found that many prominent papers simply reveal 'correlations between endogenous variables' without containing any evidence of causation. Such research is uninformative for policy makers. On a related note, it is difficult to tease practical policy advice from studies that lump all countries together without paying much attention to channels or mechanisms through which 'deep factors' are related to outcomes. For example, it is not helpful to advise African policy makers to improve their institutions to meet Scandinavian standards.

One of the most influential economics papers of the new millennium was written by Craig Burnside of Duke University and David Dollar of the World Bank. It tells the tale that development assistance only 'works' in countries with good institutions and policies. This message had intuitive appeal and fit the agenda of certain stakeholders such as the World Bank. It had a thorough impact on the development policies of donors.

Unfortunately, the results did not hold up to scrutiny. The paper did not tackle the endogeneity of aid flows, and its authors added a few data points, extending the dataset from 1993 to 1997or simply filling gaps in the original dataset. This rendered the results insignificant. The definitions of 'aid' and 'good policies' were also slightly changed when the original dataset was used. Now that the dust has settled we must conclude that, in spite of the hoopla, there is precious little in terms of content that is useful for policy makers. Unfortunately this is not an exception.

I have no problem with empirical analysis – the opposite is true. Careful empirical analysis is indispensible for informing policy makers, and cross-country regressions can provide some useful background that is somewhat based in reality. But keeping in mind Benjamin Disraeli's warning about 'lies, damned lies and statistics', one cannot be too careful when weighing the 'evidence' that is produced. ■

By **Erwin Bulte**, professor of economics at Wageningen University and Tilburg University. Professor Bulte is also a research fellow at the University of Cambridge, UK, and an advisor to the UN Food and Agriculture Organization.

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