

Civic-Driven Change: A New Impetus to the Debate?

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This policy brief describes the thinking behind and motives for a group of Dutch private aid agencies to support and help design the Civic-Driven Change Initiative.¹

Introduction

This policy brief explains why a number of Dutch development organizations have supported the civic-driven change initiative. This engagement was borne out of a shared concern about the current debate within development circles about the identity, role and added-value of private aid agencies (PAAs) in the fight against poverty. A similar debate is seen in relation to the 'backlash' against 'unaccountable' civic society organizations (CSOs).

It was felt that these debates are dominated too much by state and market perspectives on development. In these perspectives, civil society is seen as merely instrumental to government policy or in addressing market failures. As a consequence the debate has focused mainly on the relationships between civil society organizations, government and the private sector. This has resulted in significant attention given to improving cooperation between the three sectors, ranging from complementarity to partnerships. But this has been at the cost of attention to the relationship between private aid agencies and other civic actors like NGOs, social movements, support groups, associations and activist individuals.

This situation is partly the result of a lack of interest by private aid agencies to critically assess their own legitimacy and effectiveness. The successful rise of civil society is reflected in the enormous growth in number, level of activities, political influence and financial volume of civil society organizations in the past decades. But these achievements have been accompanied by a certain amount of complacency and dependency.

Aided civil society has been busy with building capacities, implementing projects, service delivery and lobbying national governments and international agencies. But generally little time and energy has been invested in the process of rethinking the theoretical underpinnings of their role, the organization of their relations with the rest of civil society, and their being one step ahead of official aid in this regard.

The Civic-Driven Change Initiative is an attempt to contribute to the current debate on civil society. Contrary to state and market perspectives, the initiative explicitly focuses on relationships stemming from citizenship as a right and from within civil society. It is hoped that this focus will provide a new impetus to a necessary critical review of the state of play.

A historical reflection

Whereas emancipation of marginalized and excluded segments of society - women, labourers, gay men and women - has mainly been the result of a relentless struggle and engagement of those who had every reason to consider themselves to be the victim of the exclusion, development aid-related policies have from the onset pointed, by and large, to a different direction. Supported by positive experiences in mitigating some of the effects of the Great Depression in the 1930s and the reconstruction of devastated Europe after World War II, state and state-controlled international entities were invested to play a pivotal role in realizing the badly needed changes in society throughout the world. Grand designs inspired ambitious policies that were framed around ideologies and experiences in the northern hemisphere. When structural results did not materialize and conditions in many cases deteriorated, a radically different approach was opted for. Instead of the motor, the state was increasingly considered to be a constraint for development. The new parole was to limit the role of the state and give way to market ideology to organize not only the economic arena but also to deeply influence the nature of arrangements between citizens and the state. Again citizens, who were supposed to benefit from the new paradigm, were nowhere in sight when far-reaching decisions were taken. The new decision-making elite considered civil society to a large extent a cost-effective deliverer of services that were previously provided by the state and/or a social and moral network that gives shape to identities and helps the group to cope with great shocks.

Not that citizens had no platform from which to advocate. The past decades have seen an enormous growth of civil society organizations, which some commentators have dubbed *the associational revolution*. The growth has occurred on local, national and international level and gave rise to the so-called global civil society. The fight against poverty and environmental degradation and for human rights has been at the forefront of activities of civil society organizations, aided and otherwise. It started with the critique on the macroeconomic focus of early development policy. Civil society rallied successfully behind a push for a human needs-based approach in the seventies, for sustainable development in the eighties, and for a rights-based approach in the nineties. Thus, CSO expansion and increasing presence has certainly influenced official development discourse but in spite of successes in tabling new ideas and mitigating negative developments, structural macro-policies have only to a very limited extent been influenced by civil society.

Structurally, civil society organizations have, in the course of time, successfully integrated in organized development processes. Many of them have found a niche as a 'third sector', as an alternative or supplement to state and corporate entities. Within those arenas, some CSOs opted for constructively cooperating with vested interests. Others focused on challenging dominant forces by critically engaging themselves in debates and challenging existing policies and practices. Yet others try to combine the two strategies. Becoming increasingly visible, CSOs have received serious attention from reflective practitioners, bureaucrats, political observers as well as scholars, some of whom have heralded CSOs as unique, critical change agents and efficient, cost-effective deliverers of essential development services. But they have also been vilified by others as unaccountable and ineffective actors that do not really make a difference but placate structural inequalities in power and wealth and let the state off the hook when it comes to assuming its responsibilities towards its citizens.

In spite of the above critiques, the role of CSOs in the development process has, over the years been, more or less been accepted. Interestingly, periodic expressions by both the advocates and, by and large, the opponents of a substantial CSO sector do not seem to have a major impact on the course of development of civil society as such.

This acceptance of status quo of the role of civil society paved the way for more attention for the technocratic question of whether CSOs and their support structures do things rightly, rather than on focusing on the question whether they do the right things. Discussion of effectiveness and efficiency - though extremely important from the perspectives of both donors and beneficiaries and not to be sidelined too easily - now tend to dominate the discourse completely. As a result, participation in the global aid arena almost necessarily led to a certain formalization of civil society initiatives. The aid-supported spectre of civil society became increasingly dominated by 'proper' non-governmental organizations staffed by professionals who are able to skilfully deal with the new requirements that are related to the new paradigm. In doing so, it almost automatically prevents a serious consideration of new ways of articulating the aspirations of those who do not have an effective voice in the political system or sufficient power in the market. The fixation on seemingly linear development processes and their (measurable) results conceals the complexity and often unpredictable nature of development processes and the need for appropriate organizational and strategic responses. And, finally, it limits the inclination for understanding structural reasons of current (under)performance of civil society organizations. In addition, it limits reflection on new roles and new formations of civil society that may better address problems of persistent poverty, social exclusion and cultural alienation within the present fast changing political and economic environment.

Currently a relative scarcity can be observed of serious reflective thinking on important aid-related issues affecting civil society. We will give a few examples. First, what new organizational identities are emerging under diverse conditions? What is happening to the nature of relations between individual citizens and organized collectives within the civic domain? What new roles are to be played

and potential strategies to be implemented in the emerging geopolitical and economic era by civil society organizations vis-à-vis the state and the corporate sector. What is driving 'uncivil' society and how can its origins and disruptiveness be countered while human rights remain respected and protected?

The lack of self-determined reflection and dedicated investment to ensure that systemic thinking with and for civic society takes place is a reason for concern. Failure to honestly critically review current policies and practices of and towards civil society organizations carries the risk of throwing out the child with the bathwater. This will happen because it is all too easily assumed that new times, by definition, require new solutions. Or, at the other extreme, when old, obsolete ideas about civil society configurations are used within the context of a new environment.

Although this is not a unique observation, discussions amongst a group of mainly Dutch representatives of civil society organizations and concerned scholars led to the conclusion that in order to continue to regain and play a cutting edge function we need to re-ignite the debate on the role and position of civil society organizations in development processes.

As a first initiative, we asked a diverse group of serious and committed thinkers and practitioners from many continents to come together. We requested them to independently discuss and reflect upon the experience and requirements of development processes that take the aspirations, actions and values of citizens as a starting point. Hopefully these reflections and analyses will thus contribute to a debate on development perspectives that acknowledge and respect the various roles that people themselves play in whatever configuration to realize the ideals they cherish.

¹ In writing this policy brief we greatly benefited from critical remarks from Johan te Velde, Pim Verhallen and Alan Fowler.