

Connecting and catalyzing



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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. ■