Report of the Symposium

‘Civic Driven Change in Fragile States?’

November 3rd 2015, Humanity House, The Hague
True change comes from within

“Can development organisations really make a change in Africa? That’s the question. The civil war has flared up again in Sudan, and Liberia has suffered from a deadly outbreak of the Ebola crisis. We can honestly say that we have not succeeded in solving all of the problems in the fragile states in which we have worked.”

These are the words of Johan Mooij, ZOA Director and Chairman of the Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation (DCR). He did not exactly blow his own trumpet about the results achieved in Africa on Tuesday evening during the opening of the ambitious symposium ‘Civic Driven Change in Fragile States?’ in The Hague. In spite of the untiring efforts of all DCR partners, the reality faced by development organisations is complex. Mooij emphasises that the role of international aid organisations is limited. “We only provide support. Social change is ultimately the responsibility of the people in the countries concerned.” At the end of this year, his organisation - ZOA - will be concluding a five-year partnership with CARE, Save the Children and HealthNet TPO.

With funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these four organisations collaborated in six fragile countries in Africa. Reason enough to take a closer look at the theme of social change processes in fragile states during a final symposium. How do these changes actually come about?

“'We only provide support. Social change is ultimately the responsibility of the people in the countries concerned'”

With funding from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, these four organisations collaborated in six fragile countries in Africa. Reason enough to take a closer look at the theme of social change processes in fragile states during a final symposium. How do these changes actually come about?

Bloody process

Seth Kaplan, professor at John Hopkins University and author of the book with the promising title of Fixing Fragile States, initiated the debate. He shared his views on the question of how the citizens of fragile states can work together more effectively with their government to bring about an impetus for social change. During a mini lecture, he explained the correlation between ‘fragmentation’ and ‘social cohesion’. Unlike what the title of the book may suggest, this is quite complicated subject matter and requires the long-term commitment of all parties involved.

Kaplan points out to his audience that fragile states often have a short and post-colonial history. “The process to define a country’s identity is often an organic and, unfortunately, bloody process”. He emphasises that this struggle is not exclusively reserved for African countries. “Also the Dutch have had their own struggles in history, such as the Habsburg Empire (1526-1804), the time when power on this continent was centralised in Vienna”. What Kaplan aims to make clear is that before the Dutch discovered their own identity, quite a lot of blood was shed.

According to Kaplan, fragile states are characterised by a high degree of fragmentation and very limited social cohesion. This means inequality by definition:
large groups of the population are excluded from government services. The political system in fragile states contributes to these problems being systematically neglected.

“Our research shows that change happens inside-out, not outside-in”

Kaplan believes it is crucial that development organisations and citizens in these countries consider how this gap can be bridged. Multi-stakeholder partnerships, preferably with a representation of various ethnic groups, can play an excellent role in this, he explains. These kinds of partnerships are perfectly suited for closing the gap of social exclusion. If change is the goal, they can deliberately focus on influencing the government. Kaplan adds, “Change happens when political systems get engaged in this process. It is important to increase the interest of decision makers.” And as to the role of outsiders, he is quite clear: “Research shows that change happens inside-out, not outside-in.”

He also emphasises that processes of change require by definition the long-term commitment of the partners (national and international) involved. This is a reality that is sometimes at odds with the performance culture of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, who would prefer to achieve results in the short term and also chooses a new strategy every financing period.

Civic space

Kees Biekart points out an important aspect lacking from Kaplan’s line of reasoning, namely the opportunity for citizens to contribute, also known as civic space. “It’s hard to speak about civic-driven change when there is no space for it!”. If citizens are not given the freedom to organise, no social change process can succeed. “If you don’t have civic space, you can’t organise. This is crucial. What worries me a lot is that in many parts of the world, not only in fragile states, we see that civic space is shrinking.” Biekart believes that inclusive citizenship is a prerequisite for social change. “If you have the rights as a citizen, but you can’t exercise them, you cannot even speak about civic-driven change.”

Biekart further challenges his audience - consisting primarily of development workers - by stating that international development organisations often do not initiate any change whatsoever, but rather the opposite: they create dependence. This statement is applauded by a number of Africans in the audience. A member of the audience states that, in his country, NGOs sometimes play a dual role: they operate with support from the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs, while the very same Dutch government also provides subsidy support to their government. He argues that this paves the way for a conflict of interest. At any rate, he draws attention to the fact that it has happened more than once that directors of local NGOs acquire their position because they have interests that are closely connected to those of the current government. This does not increase the...
chance of fundamental social change, but reduces it. Biekart believes that this dependency trap can be avoided if we no longer speak of international development cooperation, but international solidarity. This is an essential point that makes the difference between successful and unsuccessful change.

Gerard Prinsen, who works at Massey University in New Zealand, appropriately asks what this international solidarity looks like in practice? “Does this mean that we open up our European markets for African companies and abolish the limiting conditions that protect the Western market? Is that international solidarity?” The question itself makes clear that a theoretical framework is not enough. What matters is how these principles are put into practice. It is clear that there is still much work to be done. But a large number of steps have also been taken in the right direction in recent years.

Cora Jansen, coordinator at the Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation, states that community-based organisations can play an important role in this. “They are the ones who know which change is needed because they are close to the people in the community. I have seen many beautiful examples in DCR that can illustrate this.”

Johan Mooij concludes the meeting by stating that the problems are far from being resolved. He expresses the hope that the DCR partnership model that entails using one another’s strengths will also be used in other settings.

text: Marjon van Dalen
photo’s: Rixt van Gorkum

Dutch Consortium for Rehabilitation (DCR)
DCR is a consortium of four Dutch development organisations: CARE, HealthNet TPO, Save the Children and ZOA, and is financed by the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Together we focus on countries that are taking the first careful steps on the road to recovery following long-term conflict: Burundi, DR Congo, Liberia, Uganda, Sudan and South Sudan. We aim to contribute to increased stability and sustainable economic growth in these six countries that are or were in conflict because these are ultimately the best weapons against war.

Speakers
Seth Kaplan, lecturer at John Hopkins University and author of “Fixing Fragile States” and “Betrayed”
Kees Biekart, specialist in Civic Driven Change from the Erasmus University Rotterdam and ISS/The Hague

Panelists
To Tjoelker, Ministry of Foreign Affairs/Civil Society Division
Cora Jansen, DCR Central Consortium Coordinator
Gerard Prinsen, Lecturer at Massey and adviser to the DCR KN
Godfrey Ayena, DCR Country Coordinator Uganda
Roelof van Laar, Parliamentarian for the Social Democrats (PvdA)

Spoken column by Babah Tarawally (author and journalist)
Chair of the day Evelijne Bruning (a.o. Director of The Hunger Project)