

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CIVIC INNOVATION RESEARCH INITIATIVE

This Note introduces the Civic Innovation Research Initiative (CIRI) the newly established research programme at the Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University Rotterdam. More detailed information is available at www.iss.nl/ciri.

CIRI explores how organizations and individuals mobilise to change their societies. CIRI focuses on how they co-shape political, economic and cultural trends in pursuing the common interest whilst respecting differences. From an empirical grounding, CIRI aims to create a distinct field of knowledge about creativity in human agency that offers both theoretical depth and practical relevance.

This Note aims to locate CIRI within the wider context of societal issues and knowledge for action. It presents the conceptual core of CIRI; introduces CIRI's three main research strands, and proposes the way forward for CIRI to build an inter-disciplinary research agenda.

CIVIC INNOVATION - LOCATION AS A RESEARCH TERRAIN OF KNOWLEDGE FOR ACTION

A research focus on civic innovation is important in an emerging world order where increasingly leading actors are not proving capable of 'solving' the 'thick' problems the world faces. Thickness arises from complex, interacting societal dilemmas where the actors causing the problem are also key to its resolution. It is where disparate time frames are involved and where different world views are in play. Thick problems include: countering state fragility; ensuring adequate management of global public goods; reducing poverty under conditions of escalating and destabilizing inequalities and associated racism and xenophobia; preventing inter-cultural conflicts and countering patriarchal cultures and institutions leading to engrained gender discrimination and gender based violence. These, and other, dysfunctions are leading to uncertainties about the future on a global scale with local consequences everywhere.

The confluence of these thick problems are testing institutional arrangements, rules, conventions, norms and capacities. Contemporary institutional challenges are changing with shifts in global financial interdependencies due to new forms of economic and political power; consumption demands of an expanding middle class; urbanization, migration and demographic changes. The communication technologies now provide mass real-time connectivity and with it a shifting world order. There is an inter-generational movement in life expectations, with accompanying changes in employment, welfare support, political choice, sexual choice and expectations of longevity and an overall sense of an increase in individual and group freedoms.

These and other factors are shaping a sense of a new 'global age' and present a challenge to all of us on how to ensure well-being for an estimated population of some 10 billion people in 2100. In coming to terms with this fluid and rapidly changing global order we also need to ask what are the institutional implications for these changes. In a partial response to these pressing 'thick' problems, CIRI aims to create an intellectual space to explore the potential of civic innovation and to understand more fully the role civil society plays in shaping systemic societal change.

Tackling today's societal dilemmas calls for concerted efforts to shape a critical *transformative* view of change in society. CIRI begins from the premise that the academy can play an important role in shaping the policies and practices of societal change. In addition addressing 'thick' social problems through civic institutional lenses will help strengthen multi-disciplinary analytical capabilities of the academe. Such a dynamic research process requires creative inter-disciplinary empiricism along with mixed research methods and inventive approaches to methodology as for example found in inter-cultural dialogues and self-reflexive research.

Research methodologies therefore need to go beyond typical research confines of single disciplines, sectoral approaches and Western universalism, embracing the complexity and the plurality of knowledges. Deeply embedded in current approaches to studies of social change is the assumption that modernization based on economic growth is the principle driver of 'progressive' change. This assumption informs institutional designs and cultural norms shaping post-industrialised countries and their evolution of knowledge' economies. This assumption operates alongside 'other' approaches to change informed by human rights, subaltern practices and political systems theories, feminism, cultural and anthropocentric philosophies. CIRI works to produce a framework for civic innovation at the intersections between these assumptions and approaches understanding them as sources of friction. These frictions energise civic inventiveness with institutional effects in different domains of action. Such frictions are evident in innovations such as actors operating across established boundaries, (peri-) urban renewal, challenges to male dominated gender power and politics and institutional heteronormativity, the breaking of silences around violence in cultures, societies and economies, and changes to inequalities in social enterprise, in barter economy.

CIVIC INNOVATION – CORE CONCEPTS

The framing for CIRI research into these frictions is informed by three core concepts: civic, innovation and institution.

Civic: A core proposition for CIRI is that people are actively addressing the power relations they experience by creatively asserting their right to change the institutions that co-determine their lived experience and prospects. They are doing so in the '*civicus*' of a social-political world order made up of increasingly inter-dependent nation states. The origins of this concept and the notion of a *civicus* and of being 'civic', is of Western origin, emerging from ancient Greece. In ancient Greece the concept of citizen was an acquired status for freeborn men from which women, slaves, labourers

and craftsmen were excluded. The concept and title signified the behaviours expected of those allocated the rights, power, authority and responsibility to oversee and govern 'justly' emerging city states and their hinterlands for good of all. This normative property of citizenship included accountability for the proper servicing and management of public infrastructures, investments and resources derived from the whole populace.

Over two millennia, the rise of nation states has nominally relied on citizenship as a political principle and the population of the nation state is seen as a *civicus*. While not all people have enjoyed citizenship fully, citizenship is a basic premise of statehood and of people's rights. However, the history of the term reminds us that the 'civic' values of a *civicus* was originally conceived as an elite power tied to values of a concern for the whole with respect for difference. Civic values are not to be confused by or conflated with 'civilisation'. This caution is vital because history is replete with instances of external (colonial) powers 'bringing civilisation' to the New World as justification for gross physical abuse of the local people, subordinating their knowledge and subjugating them in the interests of the oppressor or 'civiliser'. What is 'civic' for one can be fatally 'uncivil' for another, where power relations co-determine which view prevails at what cost to whom.

Similarly, while highly contextualised, the notion of what is civic and what is not pervades ideas about the 'just' relations between state and society and within a *civicus* itself. Such normalizing invades epistemology within social science, and needs to be exposed. CIRI aims in its research to show commitment to social justice, care and wellbeing, promoting a critical pro-social notion of 'civic' in CIRI's investigation of innovative institutional change.

Innovation: CIRI's proposition to use the term 'innovation' is not simply one of finding and doing something new. Rather, it recognises that what is 'old' in one place or experience can be 'new' when it appears somewhere else. Moreover, also combining what already exists in previously untried arrangements can be 'innovative' in terms of forming novel combinations.

Different disciplines regard and value 'innovation' against different yard sticks that can either embrace or regard the concept of innovation with scepticism. For example, innovation to increase productivity is highly regarded in economic theory and analysis of firms and their business processes. Innovations in international law that establish new principles of jurisdiction seen in the International Criminal Court are another type of inventiveness. CIRI challenges the more sceptical theoretical position that history is embedded in all human agency, a view point that downplays the notion of social 'innovation' as the creation of anything really new.

The CIRI perspective is that no one type or expression of innovation has primacy. CIRI's goal is to be clear about what innovation means to whom and why, case-by-case, context by context. CIRI is concerned with identifying and understanding under what conditions inventiveness and originality occurs and the effects they may or may not have, on the transformation of social relations of power for good or ill. In other words, not to presuppose that innovative transformation is 'good' a priori.

Civic Innovation: These two words were first paired together in literature related to the governance of 'urbanisation' and public infrastructures adopted by the profession of civil engineering. It is illustrated in the renewal of civic centres such as Town Halls and is frequently referred to in debates about the role and responsibilities of residents in urban planning and local government. CIRI sees civic innovation in a markedly different way than from the 'built environment' angle prevalent in the United States.¹

CIRI instead, concentrates on political dimensions of people's agency as citizens everywhere confront today's complex societal problems, taking up opportunities that are less and less bounded by physical geography. CIRI's interpretation of civic innovation recognises political agency as a feature of everyday reality for all people. It cannot be reduced to conventional economic sectors, or equated with voluntarism, NGO-ism or philanthropy. CIRI's concern is with the inventiveness and originalities of civic agency directed at the 'remodelling' of (intangible) institutional arrangements towards social justice outcomes.

Institutions: Institutions can be understood as stabilising but intrinsically unfulfilled outcomes of conflicted structuration in society, which manifest themselves as social regularities and relational patterns that overtly and covertly guide behaviour. Operating at multiple scales, institutions embed, gel and mediate configurations of power that can be changed by people's agency. Societal structuration means that institutions seldom operate in isolation from one another and can be distinguished in two interpenetrating dimensions of (in)formalisation and (a)symmetry.

Institutions can be formal in terms of laws, rules and organizations, or otherwise codified social regularities. Such institutions are often designed or sanctioned by the state, firms or organizations in order to gain benefits from having a publically recognised and regulated persona. Informal institutions are repetitions, beliefs, routines and norms, or otherwise non-codified social regularities exhibited in habitual socialisation and associated language. An acculturated and psychologically predisposed *habitus* of shared language and interpretation is a critical 'holder' or 'glue' of informal institutional formations and processes. Such arrangements often emerge over long periods of social interactions which commonly involve the reproduction of identities, collective symbols and practices that give meaning to life and pre-condition a person's stance towards 'the other'. Bringing about change is typically faster for formal institutions as compared to informal institutions. However, the advent of social media is giving rise to dynamic institutional forms that both challenge existing typologies and make possible a rapid aggregated power of agency that requires critical attention.

¹ See: <http://gov20.govfresh.com/defining-civic-innovation-definition-open-government/>

Symmetric institutions guide behaviour in a similar way for everyone. They enable or constrain behaviour in the same way for all social groups in society. Examples are traffic rules or laws against theft. Asymmetric institutions, however, have a different impact on different groups. They tend to benefit some social groups over others. The asymmetry can be both in formal institutions, for example in discriminatory laws or organizations in which power is concentrated among a happy few, and in informal institutions, for example in gender-bias in beliefs about leadership or in social norms about homosexuality. For CIRC, institutions are important social phenomena, because they can both constrain civic innovation or enable it, or they can be the target of civic change or the vessel for civic change.

Civic innovation and institutions: From a CIRC perspective, civic innovation can be explained as imaginative, original or inventive values-bound agency directed at transforming institutional rigidities that perpetuate inequalities by protecting the beneficiaries of prevailing power relations.

Within this framing of key concepts, the ISS trajectory of CIRC brings together three themes of enquiry.

CIRC STRANDS

The CIRC group covers three substantive knowledge/action areas that differ in their research origins but which share underlying drivers that inform CIRC's collective effort. All see the potential value of civic innovation as an analytic lens within each research strand focus of enquiry. Each strand challenges mainstream disciplinary approaches to their focus of enquiry. The strands question the boxing in of lived realities into preconceived social structures and dichotomized categories such as public/private, for-profit/non-profit, political-economic sectors, male/female, homosexual/heterosexual, democracy/authoritarian. All strands aim to explore the energy and innovations found at the 'rough edges' between disciplines and in the inventive, real life messiness operating across conventional boundaries. In this search, each of the strands is developing innovative research methods in their enquiries that counter an empirical subject/objective divide. Each strand takes up the challenge to engage in research in multidisciplinary ways that stimulate innovation and creativity in research methods.

Market institutions: explores inclusion and justice in value chains, especially the rights of workers and of primary producers at the bottom of the chain; the blending of corporate economic behaviour towards leadership, social values, 'shared value' and the development relevance of social entrepreneurship and corporate social responsibility; exploring the 'demonetization' of economic transactions; and a concern for decent livelihoods.

Governance institutions: analyses regionalism in governing; takes on board drivers and emergent processes of political agency, looks at extra-parliamentary democracy, with a concern for reconfiguration of power. It interrogates the concept and practice of state-bound citizenship; questions policy determinants of decision-making in urbanization processes; looks at the notion of rights when associated with multiple meanings of identity; and unpacks the role(s) of (poly-)centric governance in the dynamics of state-society relations.

Sexuality institutions: challenges conventional treatment of sexuality in debates informing development, western feminism, social movements and gender. It looks more closely at the lived realities, emotions and experiences of sexuality across the world in diverse cultural positioning encompassing: embodiment, 'body politics', and the re-conceptualisation of the sexuality in relation to global problems across cultures, economies and institutionalised configurations of power.

CIRI METHODS

CIRI employs a range of 'friction-sensitive' methods necessary for this complex field of study. This sensitivity involves reconciling or managing tensions at the 'nexus of academic and social practice debates'. The methods applied to civic innovation are thereby vulnerable to critical scrutiny by both the academy and by agents of civic innovation. Satisfying these challenging conditions allows CIRI to come closer to the complexity of real-life through mutual learning processes.

A common feature of CIRI methodology is their actor-centric emphasis/starting point. There is a wariness of the typically 'extractive' nature of academic enquiry; hence CIRI begins from the premise that research questions need to be co-generated. These emphases is evident in CIRI's methodological preferences for research using:

- Inter-cultural dialogues
- Engaged research / activist research / participatory research
- Actor self-reflexivity
- Multi-stakeholder encounters and exchanges

These approaches lead to variety of qualitative research practices including workshops, case studies, video-making, participant observation, self-reflexivity as well as more traditional methods of quantitative surveys, literature reviews, archival and historical analysis. Methods are selectively applied to different research topics, domains and combination of agents. Learning how to apply the most effective mix and match of these different research practices will be at the core of the CIRI research process.

There is also a shared recognition that knowledge is both multiple and distributed. Hence, knowledge partnerships are a conscious feature of the CIRI research strategy, repertoire and competency.

The overall challenge for CIRI is to be able to demonstrate the efficacy of these innovative research methods as part of CIRI's contribution to knowledge, agency, policy making and practice and as a challenge to 'donor or aid-led' development.

A CIRI RESEARCH AGENDA

The inspiration for CIRI's research agenda comes from aiming to offer answers to research questions founded in contemporary problems of high society relevance. CIRI adds an epistemic contribution to the shared concerns of 'thick' problems of our complex global world order. Reaching agreement on just what are these key shared questions is at the core of CIRI's current debates and discussions as the CIRI research agenda is being shaped.

The following broad questions point to the entry point of research to be taken up by all three strands of CIRI. In bringing together the three strands CIRI will be re-interpreting ongoing work with an innovative civic lens as well as finding new areas of concern.

1. Under what conditions does what type of civic innovation gain traction on what types of institutional change and why?
 - a. Is civic innovation sensitive to the (multiple) scale(s) of change intended?
 - b. Are different domains of societal change more or less susceptible to civic innovation?
2. What additional insights about socio-political processes does a civic innovation lens provide when compared with others?

In what ways and when can/does civic innovation exert influence across theory, policy and practice?