

The Future of Democracy Assistance

Seminar Report

28 – 29 April 2005, Nairobi

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1. Introduction

On 28 and 29 April 2005, the Clingendael Institute hosted a two-day conference on 'The Future of Democracy Assistance' at the Fairview Hotel in Nairobi (Kenya). The objectives for this conference were threefold; sharing recent experiences with democracy assistance programs; identifying some of the main lessons learned in this field; and finally, formulating concrete steps for future research and policy dialogue on the effectiveness of democracy assistance. For this occasion, a mix of policy makers, practitioners and academics from different (international) organizations was invited (see list of participants attached to this report). The conference marked the finalization of the so-called Democratic Transition Project that was executed over the past three years by the Clingendael Institute in collaboration with national research teams in eight post-conflict countries (Cambodia, Ethiopia, Rwanda, Uganda, Mozambique, Sierra Leone, El Salvador and Guatemala). The outcomes of this project were compared to other recent research initiatives by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) and Afrobarometer. In addition, presentations were given by representatives from donor agencies like DFID and UNDP.

Instead of giving a chronological account of the conference proceedings, this summary report will highlight some of the main issues and conclusions that came to the fore during the discussions. Although Clingendael's Democratic Transition Project covered a broader range of regions, the conference discussions were limited to the African context.

2. Background

During the last two decades, the international community has become increasingly involved in promoting democratic governance all over the world. Two observations need to be made here. First, there is a need to define what is meant by democracy and how to best promote it. The exact definition remains a matter for (academic) debate. For practical reasons, international agencies define democracy along two dimensions. On the one hand there is the elementary institutional infrastructure, comprising the rule of law (including judiciary, human rights commission, etc.), competitive elections (including political parties, parliament, etc.) and independent media (public watchdog). On the other hand, democracy is conceptualized in terms of the particular set of norms, ideas, beliefs and values that together form a democratic culture. What is of importance here is that, as indispensable as democratic institutions are, they need the existence of a democratic culture to ensure the creation and consolidation of a genuine democracy. Put simply, a democratic culture and democratic institutions are complementary and mutually reinforcing.

Second, democratization has proven to be a long-term process that is largely driven by internal political developments and domestic actors. This begs the fundamental question whether there is scope for international donors to influence and contribute to democratization processes. Experience shows that the influence of external donors in nurturing a democratic culture is limited. What donors can provide are in essence resources (e.g. to civil society organizations), expertise (e.g. helping to write a constitution) and training (e.g. to parliamentarians). This implies that one has to be modest in regard to the impact of democracy assistance.

3. Building Democracy in Post-Conflict Societies

Building democracy after conflict has been an important challenge for donors during the past decade. Five main issues can be mentioned here.

The Problem of Security. Societies that emerge from conflict are generally characterized by a climate of insecurity. This can have a profound effect on the process of democratization. For instance, the

presence of armed militias and ex-soldiers, the rise in crime rates and stockpiles of (small) arms pose direct threats to sustainable peace-building and the fostering of democratic institutions. Reforming the security sector (SSR) and the disarmament, demobilization and reintegration (DDR) of ex-combatants are therefore essential to create a more secure environment, especially in order to enhance human security.

State Failure. Protracted internal conflict is highly correlated with the phenomenon of state failure. A failed state that is unable to perform its basic tasks and governed by a government considered illegitimate by large parts of the population will form an impediment to democratization. As such, building democracy is inevitably intertwined with state- and nation-building.

Volatile Political Situation. The signing of a peace agreement may signal the ending of armed hostilities, but that does not imply that there is at once a stable political climate. Parties that were involved in the conflict are likely to secure as much power as possible. Political arrangements are consequently often susceptible to power-play and manipulation by powerful political actors and spoilers. This may lead to an unstable political climate that threatens the democratization process within a country.

Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and Refugees. Post-conflict societies are characterized by large numbers of IDPs and refugees who tried to escape the immediate consequences of conflict. The relocation and return of IDPs and refugees create additional demands on state institutions that are already under strain. Also important is that refugees from neighboring countries may cross borders and end up in other countries, which could potentially have major political repercussions.

Justice and Peace. Inevitably, post-conflict societies will have to deal with the legacies of conflict. Dealing with demands for justice and starting a process of reconciliation are crucial for the long-term prospects of democracy in post-conflict societies. However, state institutions that can address demands for justice are generally lacking or poorly functioning. As a result, war criminals are often left unpunished, adding to a culture of impunity that will hinder reconciliation efforts. Here there is a dilemma in the sense that legitimate demands for justice cannot be properly addressed in the short-term, which may carry consequences for the long term prospects of democracy.

The foregoing discussion shows that democracy assistance in post-conflict countries entails various trade-offs. For instance, there are questions relating to sequencing and timing. Is there a certain order to building democracy in post-conflict societies? And what is the right moment to organize elections? Such questions also imply that choices have to be made. But, who is making these choices, is it the international community or is it local actors? Related to this is the question whether local actors have the capacity to make adequate and well-informed choices? In summary, such questions deal with the roles of and relationship between the international community and local actors as far as processes of democratization are concerned.

There are many challenges and limitations, but there still is considerable scope for international actors to assist democracies in post-conflict societies. Apart from providing technical assistance and resources, donors may e.g. consider to exert more pressure on new governments to make serious efforts in building democratic institutions and adhering to democratic standards.

4. Positive Developments

Zooming in on the challenges and obstacles to democracy in Africa should not distract from positive developments with regard to democratization. The last decade and a half saw the majority of African countries adopting multiparty elections, thereby replacing governance systems based on one-party, dictatorial or military rule. Such a development indicates that ruling elites in Africa, despite authoritarian inclinations, are aware of the widespread legitimacy democracy as a form of governance is currently enjoying. Also, the fact that former refugees and diasporas are returning to their country of origin confirms that African countries are becoming politically more stable and show encouraging signs of democratic development.

As for African citizens themselves, surveys like Afrobarometer, indicate that there exists a wide popular base for democracy and that for a substantial majority of African citizens democracy is preferable to any other kind of government. This suggests that, at the very least, there is fertile ground for democracy to grow in Africa. Local stakeholders and the international community should attempt to find and devise modes of assistance that can build on these positive developments and can help to sustain current democratization processes.

5. Constraints to International Democracy Assistance

There are two main ‘entry points’ for external actors to engage in democracy assistance: one is to focus on the state; the other is to focus on civil society. So far, most democracy programming has focused on civil society organizations under the assumption that this will have a positive effect on democratization. Nevertheless, donors have also opted for bilateral agreements with governments, working with and providing assistance to existing state institutions. When the international community is serious in helping countries to become more democratic, both entry points should be used. However, the fact that the international community can by definition only support democracy ‘from without’ means that there are a number of problems with which international democracy promoters continue to grapple.

Engaging with ‘Unwilling’ Regimes. Despite many positive examples, there exist a number of African countries where democratic institutions have been adopted by the government in order to give legitimacy to an authoritarian regime. Such façade democracies pose a fundamental problem for the international community, as it makes clear that informal practices of nepotism and corruption can hamper the proper functioning of formal democratic institutions. In such cases, conventional sanctions have proven largely ineffective in pressing leaders to adhere to democratic standards. Also, such sanctions may be harmful to ordinary citizens. The dilemma international actors are being faced with is that conditionalities that aim for political liberalization may clash with broader development goals. What are being called for are context-specific and more multi-dimensional forms of pressure.

Limitations to Donor Approaches. Apart from domestic obstacles in recipient countries, democracy assistance itself suffers from a number of problems. To begin with, limitations to donor budgets means that in most cases it will be impossible to give support to the whole gamut of democratic institutions. Second and closely related to the reality of budget constraints is the fact that donor agencies are required to report back to their own constituencies. This need for political accountability results in a preoccupation of donors to show for short-term and measurable results. Although understandable from a domestic perspective, such ‘quick-win’ strategies are ill at ease with the fact that democratization processes in post/conflict countries take a long term to materialize. Another limiting factor is the existence of different donor interests and objectives. This may give rise to political/institutional

barriers that can hamper efforts to enhance co-ordination and co-operation among donors. Finally, being relative outsiders to a domestic process, democracy promoters find it difficult to connect with the grass-roots level. Here, one finds several civil society actors, especially in rural areas, and traditional modes of governance, which may represent useful entry points for international democracy assistance. Yet, most donor agencies are generally not at ease with or adequately positioned to target democracy aid at actors and institutions operating at the grass-roots level, and therefore opt mainly for working with capital-based NGOs.

Political Considerations to Democracy Assistance

Another reality that has to be taken into account by democracy promoters is that assistance to democracy takes place alongside other foreign policy objectives. This has become even more obvious in the current 'post-9/11' climate in which democracy promotion is being framed as an essential strategy in the war on terror. The case of Ethiopia makes clear that particular security interests do not always coincide with the democracy promotion agenda. For a long time, western governments attached more importance to regime security in Ethiopia -a country that is crucial to stability in the troubled Horn region- than to genuine democratic reform in that country. However justified that may be, it implied that there was little international attention or resources for improving the problematic electoral framework or opening up the political and media landscape. Now there are signs that this has had negative consequences for the democratization process in Ethiopia.

6. New Areas of Assistance

Scholars and democracy promoters alike have become experts at defining and discussing obstacles and challenges to democracy in Africa. Although this constitutes a necessary first step in designing better democracy assistance programs, the ultimate challenge is to move one step further and to come up with concrete suggestions for future assistance programs. Broadly, there are four areas of assistance that may offer promising prospects for enhancing international engagement with democratization processes.

Assistance to Political Parties. Donors have come to accept that adequately functioning political parties and party systems are crucial to democracies. Political parties find themselves at the heart of democracies, and are a *conditio sine qua non* for the organization of free and fair elections and the effective functioning of parliaments. This partly stems from the fact that NGOs cannot simply replace political parties. However, support to political parties remains a thorny issue, especially when donors become directly involved in domestic political processes. The key challenge for donors is to come up with an appropriate way of assisting political parties, while avoiding to be labeled partisan. Channeling donor assistance via independent foundations might be a suitable alternative for donors supporting political parties. Also, support to political parties should be designed in such a way that it makes political parties sustainable.

Community-based Radio. Independent and properly functioning media are an essential aspect of democratic systems. Media have a role to play in disseminating information to citizens. Moreover, they are a useful vehicle to create a culture of accountability and transparency. As a concrete suggestion, donors' current focus on urban-based print media should shift to community based radios, since they can reach a wider public, especially in the rural areas. In this field, donors can provide much needed expertise, training and resources.

State-building. In the nearby future, the international community will continue to face the challenge of building democracies in post-conflict societies. Post-conflict reconstruction involves building democratic institutions alongside state-building. There are many trade-offs and dilemmas involved in such an undertaking. The key issue for international actors is to gain a better understanding of the relationship between state-building and democracy-building. The ultimate goal is to come up with modes of assistance that are able to foster democratic institutions, while at the same time creating functioning state institutions. As an example, security sector reform (SSR) involves a crucial aspect of state-building as well as democratization. A reform of the security sector e.g. implies the strengthening of parliamentary capacity to have oversight over this sector, which clearly relates to democracy assistance.

Regional Organizations. Africa can be characterized as a continent that is poorly integrated, both in economic and political terms. Regional organizations represent a starting point for building and enhancing organizational capacities, both domestically as well as regionally. Since international actors are not always well positioned to engage with domestic political processes, more attention should be given to the role of regional actors and organizations in African democratization processes. Regional organizations can be expected to have a better understanding of local and regional contexts in which African democracies have to grow. Furthermore, there are key regional players on the African continent (like Nigeria and South Africa) that could play an important role in leading the processes of democratization further.

Conference Program

Day 1 (28 April 2005) Lessons Learned in International Democracy Assistance

- 09.00 Welcome and Opening
Gerard Duijffes, Deputy Head of Mission, Royal Netherlands Embassy
- 09.05 Introduction to the Conference
Chair: Agnes Abuom
- 09.15 Major Issues in Democracy and Governance
- Lessons Learned from Clingendael's 'Democratic Transition Project'
Jeroen de Zeeuw, Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute, Netherlands
- Discussants:
Mzwanele Mfunwa, Development Management Division, UNECA, Ethiopia
Cyril Daddieh, Center for Democratic Development (CDD), Ghana
- 10.00 Plenary Discussion
Chair: Agnes Abuom
- 10.45 Tea Break
- 11.15 International Democracy Assistance: Donor Perspectives
- Governance in Post-Conflict Situations, Challenges for the UN
Eva Busza, UNDP Bureau for Crisis Prevention and Recovery, USA
- Governance & Poverty Reduction
Sue Lane, Department for International Development, United Kingdom
- Discussant:
James Polhemus, independent consultant
- 11.45 Plenary Discussion
Chair: Agnes Abuom
- 13.00 Lunch
- 14.00 International Democracy Assistance: African Perspectives
- Supporting No-Party Democracy in Uganda
John-Jean Barya, Centre for Basic Research (CBR), Uganda

Rebuilding a Failed State in Sierra Leone

Mohamed Gibril Sesay, Forum for Democratic Initiatives (FORDI), Sierra Leone

Consolidating Peace and Democracy in Mozambique

Carolina Hunguana, Centro de Estudos sobre Democracia e Desenvolvimento (CEDE), Mozambique

Discussant :

Jean-Paul Kimonyo, Rwanda

15.00 Plenary Discussion
Chair: Agnes Abuom

16.15 Closing Remarks
Agnes Abuom and Luc van de Goor, Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute (Netherlands)

16.30 Reception

18.00 BBQ dinner in the gardens of the Fairview Hotel

Day 2 (29 April 2005) Future Steps for Democracy Assistance Research and Policy

09.00 Obstacles to Democracy in Africa
Krishna Kumar, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, USAID

09.15 Plenary Discussion on a) Main Obstacles; b) Local Needs for Assistance
Chair: Krishna Kumar, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, USAID

10.00 Plenary Discussion on c) Modes of Assistance
With short introductions on:

Bilateral Donors – *Ellen Beijers, Netherlands Ministry of Foreign Affairs*

NGOs – *Cyril Daddieh, Center for Democratic Development (CDD)*

Multilateral Donors – *Eva Busza, United Nations Development Program (UNDP)*

Chair: Krishna Kumar, Center for Development Information and Evaluation, USAID

11.00 Tea Break

11.15 Plenary Discussion on d) Suggestions for Policy and Research

12.30 Closing Remarks
Jeroen de Zeeuw, Conflict Research Unit, Clingendael Institute, Netherlands

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