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Democratising Democracy Assessments: the State of Democracy Methodology

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Abstract

In the '90s donor rhetoric gave prominence to "governance" concerns. All the variations of governance discourses referred to the dimension of democratization, as one of the pillars of "good governance", in addition to participatory development, respect for human rights, public sector management and anti-corruption. Governance assessment tools proliferated in many donor agencies, with a parallel interest in governance indicators to measure aid effectiveness and impact.

In the last years, recognition of the importance of the political dimensions of change and a more explicit consideration of democracy trends as important factors affecting aid policies and practices, led to the refinement of democracy assessment tools. Such tools are increasingly being used by donor agencies for defining their development cooperation strategies in developing countries.

The paper addresses some of the main methodological issues arising from the use of democracy assessment frameworks in donor agencies, and the role of democracy assessments in the definition of aid strategies.

Drawing on the experience of the State of Democracy approach developed by International IDEA, as well as on democracy assessments tools and methodologies developed by OECD/Development Assistance Committee (DAC) member states, the paper takes into account the inconsistencies between frameworks used at the same time for different purposes, such as: (a) comparing trends at global and regional levels; (b) fostering/facilitating in-country dialogue on reforms; (c) shaping donor policies on democracy assistance as well as broader aid strategies.

Though only the third purpose is explicitly about donor-driven processes, the paper will consider the role of donors with respect to the other two purposes as well. In fact, donors use democracy assessment tools for three main aims: (a) drafting aid programs on "good governance" and democracy building themes; (b) mainstreaming democracy building concerns in country assistance strategies; (c) defining aid allocations based on an assessment of democracy trends, alongside other selectivity criteria. The paper also addresses donors' quest for "governance" indicators capable of capturing some political dimensions of development, and the methodological challenges faced in the search of relevant and comparable indicators.

1. Donors' governance discourses

Between 1995 and 2000, at the same time when IDEA's Handbook on Democracy Assessment was developed, donors sought indicators capable of measuring progress in the achievement of a set of internationally agreed objectives, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set in the 2000 Millennium Summit. Clear and explicitly measurable goals for international development by 2015 selected from the numerous commitments given at major UN global conferences and summits during the early 1990s, the eight MDGs are: (i) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; (ii) achieve universal primary education; (iii) promote gender equality and empower women; (iv) reduce child mortality; (v) improve maternal health; (vi) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; (vii) ensure environmental sustainability; (viii) develop a global partnership for development. The MDGs embrace 18 specific targets. Donor and partner countries rely upon a set of 48 indicators for monitoring progress on the achievement of individual goals and targets.

The same period witnessed also the emergence and consolidation of donor discourses on good governance. As Landman and Häusermann pointed out, good governance is a systematized concept of governance, developed from a "generic reference to the overall set of relations with the public sphere to one that includes an expanding set of normative dimensions" (Landman and Häusermann, 2003:86).

Broadly defined, governance is "the exercise of economic, political and administrative authority to manage a country's affairs at all levels. It comprises the mechanisms, processes and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their legal rights, meet their obligations and mediate their differences" (UNDP, 1997). Initially seen as "the manner in which power is exercised in the management of a country's economic and social resources" (World Bank, 1992), the concept of governance has subsequently been related to human development: "Advancing human development requires governance that is democratic in both form and substance - for the people and by the people" (UNDP, 2002). The main normative dimensions of this concept relate to predictable, open, transparent and enlightened policy-making, the presence of a bureaucracy imbued with professional ethos, an executive arm accountable for its actions, and strong civil society institutions participating in public affairs. The role of the private sector is also increasingly underlined. Good governance requires that all these actors behave under the rule of law.

Prevailing donor discourses stress the close linkages between participatory development, democratization, good governance and human rights. In its 1993 *Orientations* on this subject, the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) identified four areas of concern for good governance: the rule of law, public sector management, controlling corruption, and reducing excessive military expenditure. Following the global UN conferences and summits of the first half of the nineties, the links between open, democratic and accountable systems of governance and respect for human rights, and the ability to achieve sustained economic and social development has been increasingly recognized, stating that "participatory development and good governance must be central concerns in the allocation and design of development assistance" (DAC, 1995).

Despite the priority assigned to building capacity for good governance as a crucial element of an enabling environment for poverty reduction and sustainable development (UNDP, 2002), and though MDG 8 included a reference to "better governance", the MDGs failed to embody

a goal on democracy and governance issues. In the process that led to the definition of the MDGs, donor agencies could not find an agreement on a set of indicators, suitable for capturing some of the political dimensions of development, and at the same time consistent with the prevailing donor discourse good governance.

Donors are therefore confronted with an apparent paradox for an aid apparatus that places a great emphasis on effectiveness, impact and results-based management. Some of the key factors for the attainment of development goals are difficult to measure, because there is not conceptual clarity on their definition. On the other hand, their definition is not perceived as acceptable by the 'partner' countries which should 'own' the reforms needed for sustainable change. Even in the few cases where there is agreement on some aspects of governance, the available indicators are not satisfactory, as they are largely based on subjective measures, or proxy measures capturing only some elements of the broad governance concept (Landman and Häusermann, 2003:28-33).

If we look at some examples of donor assessment frameworks, we notice that they mostly aim at designing aid planning processes, so as to make a more effective use of donor resources, for the purpose of achieving stated objectives by directly supporting a democratization process or taking into account the possible impact on democratization of other aid actions. As indicated in one of such frameworks: 'Donors such as USAID, have found that political issues are as important to a country's development as other issues such as health and economic growth and that many developmental plans have floundered on political shoals. In particular donors believe that support for democracy should be part of their developmental effort (...) This strategic assessment framework is designed to help define a country-appropriate program to assist in the transition and consolidation of democracy' (USAID, 2000:10). The assessment tool is used for extracting information that may be useful for understanding the nature of the political game in transitional settings, the actors engaged in such transitions, the institutional arenas in which the game is played and donor interests and resources, so as to produce programme recommendations and their likely impacts on democratic reforms.

The importance of understanding the country context for more effective aid is a constant concern of donor agencies, which tried to refine the traditional assessment tools in light of a greater awareness of political processes and institutions. The UK Department for International Development's (DfID) good governance assessment framework - structured for assessing the quality of national governance systems - used a series of checklists for eight major areas: state viability and sustainable livelihoods guidance sheets sovereignty, structure of government, transfer of power and electoral arrangements, levels of government, government effectiveness (institutional and economic) and treatment of the population. In 1997-99 the authors of IDEA's assessment framework - Beetham, Bracking, Kearton and Weir - advised DfID on how to adapt the governance assessment framework adopted by the department for in-country use to measure progress towards sustainable development and good governance empowering poor communities and protecting human rights.

A donor tool with explicit references to IDEA's State of Democracy (SoD) framework is the "Draft Handbook on promoting Good Governance in EC Development and Co-operation", designed as a tools for European Commission (EC) staff to understand the meaning and importance of good governance, mainstream governance concerns in other areas of work,

and identify the key issues to consider when defining and implementing specific programmes and projects to promote good governance.

At the end of the nineties, there was an increasing donor demand for measurement of what good governance is and how it relates to poverty reduction and development. Measuring governance was deemed important for different reasons: understanding the determinants and impacts of good governance and its relationship with development; tracking changes in governance over time within and between countries; facilitating domestic debate as citizens of developing countries demand better, more transparent and accountable governance; allowing donors to assess rationally governance capacities and performance in differing country contexts; and providing a basis for governance performance-based aid allocation, to design, monitor and assess the progress of development programmes and strategies.

The challenge was to measure governance trends in partner countries in a way likely to lead to constructive change, consistent with both aid policy priorities set by the donor community and the principle of country ownership of the development process. The challenge lies in the political acceptability of the proposed governance indicators, their policy relevance coupled with their statistical robustness in predicting governmental performance, as well as assessing trends in key areas, like the respect for human rights, democratization processes, and the rule of law.

2. The debate on governance indicators in the OECD/DAC GOVNET

The OECD/DAC addressed this issue in its work on governance since the approval of the *Shaping the 21st Century Strategy* (DAC, 1996), a policy statement that contributed to the definition and endorsement of the MDGs. While the 1996 DAC statement did not set any specific target on governance, it stressed that commitment to good governance is a key factor for the achievement of the goals: “Essential to the attainment of these measurable goals are qualitative factors in the evolution of a more safe stable participatory and just society. These include capacity development for effective, accountable, democratic governance, the protection of human rights and respect for the rule of law”. Furthermore, the strategy maintained that “investment of development resources in democratic governance will contribute to more accountable, transparent and participatory societies conducive to development progress”. As donors are increasingly turning to improvements in democratic governance as a way to determine the volume, nature and *modus operandi* of development activities, pressure for elaborating performance indicators to assess the degree of political, social and economic freedom in partner countries is growing. While this may be desirable it is nonetheless a daunting task because of the political and practical difficulties involved.

In 1998 and 1999 the OECD convened meetings of experts, including from partner countries, to discuss the issue of governance and whether any suitable indicators existed or could be devised. One key message of those meetings was to be clear about the purpose and level at which indicators of governance might be used, as this inevitably shapes the indicator set that evolves. There are three levels of indicators:

- (i) *Global indicators for general use*: they should be selective, universally acceptable and reasonably representative of democratic governance;

- (ii) *In-country processes*: these are necessary for promoting ownership and partnership in the democratic governance agenda and acting upon it;
- (iii) *Donor-driven indicators and processes*: these are valid from the point of view of bilateral and multilateral agencies with aid allocation decisions to make.

The joint OECD/United Nations/ World Bank/IMF Forum on Development Progress in March 2000 attempted to select appropriate governance indicators for monitoring progress at a global level. However, the criteria needed for global indicators did not match well the reality of data available for the processes that donors aimed at measuring. The available indicators generated a set of so-called “first generation governance indicators”. In the definition of such indicators, the importance of governance for economic outcomes was stressed. They were mostly subjective, expert based and aggregate, drawing also on some commercial risk assessment.

The search for governance indicators in the global context highlighted their elusive nature, due to the lack of a single concept on, or consensus about, what to measure. Causal links to poverty reduction are not proven conclusively. However, policy-oriented research suggested that high ratings in the World Bank Country Policy and Institutional Assessments (CPIAs) are positively linked to aid effectiveness (Collier and Dollar, 1999). The World Bank Institute work on governance indicators stressed a positive statistical relationship between rule of law, voice and accountability, low graft and higher literacy, high per capita income, lower infant mortality (Kaufman, Kraay and Mastruzzi, 2005).

The term “second generation governance indicators” was introduced with the launch of a Department for International Development (DfID)-funded World Bank project, to convey the degree to which the project sought to build on the first generation of work that opened up the initial inquiry into the relationships between governance and development. The first generation of governance indicators had helped to draw attention to the right issues, but their proliferation had not been accompanied by improved insight into practical reforms or any greater traction on reform targets. The interrelated problems the first generation indicators faced was that they were unspecific, and intrinsically difficult to accept politically.

The criteria for the “second generation governance indicators” were: political acceptability (due to transparency); availability across many countries and over time; institutional specificity, therefore operational; high quality and accuracy; and simplicity. Following an online consultation, the candidate second generation indicators produced an even list of items that provided measures of different aspects of the governance domain, mainly focused on economic and public sector management governance. Few indicators met all the tests of wide country coverage, reliability and replicability of data, representativeness, accuracy and legitimacy in terms of their collection. Examples of such “second generation indicators” included: budget volatility; business percentage of revenues paid as bribes; business perceptions of volatility; contract enforcement; contract intensive money; International Trade Tax Revenue; phone faults; regulation of entry; revenue volatility; and telephone wait times. Given the limited relevance of many of such indicators to main dimensions of the governance discourse, it appeared increasingly clear that an analysis of sets of indicators de-linked from a consideration of different assessment frameworks and methodologies would have had no impact on donor policies.

In this context, IDEA's work on democracy assessments was considered, together with other approaches, at an expert workshop governance indicators and assessment methodologies organized in October 2002 by the DAC Network on Good Governance and Capacity Development (GOVNET) to review experience in this area, including the peer review mechanism developed within the New Partnership for Africa Development (NEPAD). The workshop stressed the importance of combining conventional governance indicators and other sources of data, like expert panels, public surveys and reviews of laws and instruments. IDEA's SoD framework was recognized as a good example of a methodology providing support to in-country dialogue processes including nationally-led processes for governance reform.

In the same period, a growing recognition of the political economy dimensions of aid led to some donors focusing on the conditions that strengthen local support to reform and change, questioning the role of external actors (including aid agencies) in fostering change, not only in donor rhetoric but also through concrete practices. Though the consequence of broader concerns about aid effectiveness, this emerging attitude has a direct influence on the approaches used by donors for defining their strategic frameworks, and is worth for consideration in the present analysis.

3. Evolving donor approaches to supporting reform

Donor interest in democracy assessments stems from two broad areas of work: the traditional stream of activities labeled under the general definition of democracy assistance and a more recent and expanding body of practices, based on the analysis of the political economy of poverty reduction, focused on structural and institutional incentives for change.

Democracy assistance consists of aid policies and programmes aiming at promoting and consolidating democracy in partner countries. It is "aid specifically designed to foster a democratic opening in a non-democratic country or to further a democratic transition in a country that has experienced a democratic opening" (Carothers, 1999:6). Initially considered as an important area of action by few donors, this domain has attracted a growing volume of resources as a consequence of the emphasis on democracy and good governance of the early nineties, with aid agencies less willing to support countries with poor governance.

Though intuitively easy to define, the field of democracy assistance covers a wide range of activities, some of which are categorized by the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) under the broader policy marker of 'participatory development and good governance', a general label pulling together categories ranging from public sector management to peace-building.

Democracy assistance seeks to achieve a variety of goals, not necessarily related to each other and broadly felt by external actors (governmental, intergovernmental and non governmental bodies) as actions contributing to a home-grown democratization agenda. As a result the landscape is highly varied, encompassing the provision of technical assistance in more traditional areas (like election management, constitutional reform, parliaments, the judiciary, support to civil society), new and relatively more recent areas (like the strengthening of political parties and civil-military relations), and other domains overlapping with the realm of development cooperation and humanitarian aid (like post-conflict

rehabilitation and reconstruction). It is therefore difficult to assess the overall volume of aid flows that can be categorised under the democracy assistance rubric. Nevertheless, according to rough estimates, over the last 15 years up to 10% of the overall volume of aid was devoted to democracy, human rights and governance (Uvin, 2004:85-86).

The second and more indirect way of addressing issues relevant for democracy building is related to the recent donor interest in political change and power relations in recipient countries. Donor rhetoric widely recognizes the importance of democracy promotion. While only few donors invest substantive volumes of aid on strengthening democracy per se, there is a growing number of aid agencies involved in the field of democracy assistance, and most of them refer to democracy promotion in the context of governance discourses. In addition to the recognition of the virtues and intrinsic value of democracy, the inclusion of its promotion among the policies supported by the aid apparatus is grounded on the need to hold the state in partner countries more accountable to its citizens, and in particular to people living in poverty.

We will focus on some implications for democracy building of the second approach, and namely the broader donor interest in the relationships between political change and development, as emerging from current discussions on the so-called power and drivers of change analysis.

The “drivers of change” approach was launched by the UK DfID with the aim of enhancing donor agencies’ capacity to understand how change occurs, and the relationship between change and poverty reduction.

Change has always been at the core of development policies and practices. A unifying factor of the professional identity of development specialists, irrespective of their specific sector of work, is the assumption that what they have to offer is above all an action-oriented expert knowledge, useful for bringing about change. In deploying their expert knowledge, development practitioners have been confronted with the challenge of identifying the obstacles to the change processes associated with development, as well as the individuals and institutions deemed to act as change agents, so as to meet the needs of the expected beneficiaries, by adopting new technologies, developing skills and managing resources. Beyond the project and programme level, such change agents have been identified as individual champions of reform. In the face of the failure, or unexpected results, of change processes, either ‘lack of political will’ - whatever this vague expression may mean - or vested interests against reform, or capacity and resources gaps have often been cited among the main factors affecting aid effectiveness.

The drivers of change agenda is a way of understanding the political economy of poverty reduction in developing countries by looking at other factors that are at play in any given context. The approach forces development practitioners to focus on the understanding of the broader systemic and institutional factors that influence the possibilities for individual reformers to succeed. Drivers of changes are processes that involve three types of factor - structural features, institutions and agents - “with relationships of power, inequality and conflict at their heart” (DfID, 2003:6). Structural features include natural and human resources, economic and social structure, and other non-institutional facts; institutions consist of the frameworks of rules structuring the behaviour of agents; and agents are individual and organizations pursuing particular interests. It is interesting to note that the

DfID Drivers of Change Team felt the need to specify that “drivers will not normally be specific organizations and still less individual actors” (DfID, 2003:6). The need to specify drivers in this way seems indicative of the fact that development practitioners (as well as democracy promoters) tend to confuse institutions with agents (like organizations), whose strengthening is considered as an important element of a pro-active strategy of external support to reform and change. The use of the term ‘institutions’ to refer interchangeably to abstract notions and actual organizations can create some confusion, whereas the drivers of change discourse draws a distinction between institutions intended as ‘rules of the game’ and organizations conceived as ‘agents’ or ‘players’.

Drivers of change work initially looks to basic country analysis, by answering questions on foundational, medium term/institutional and short term factors. Among the foundational factors, key issues include the presence and nature of a political community, government control of the territory, history of state formation, embedded social and economic structures and other elements that shape the basic characteristics of the political system. The medium term factors focus on the institutionalization of the bureaucracy, policy mechanisms, political parties, civil society organizations, the basis for political competition, the composition of the political elite, the basis of political mobilization (around issues or patronage networks), the importance of ethnicity, and power sharing issues. The short term factors focus on government capacities, key mechanisms for vertical and horizontal accountability, and political resources (Moore, 2002).

A second step consists of the analysis of medium term dynamics, with a set of questions that recalls some of those embodied in IDEA’s State of Democracy assessment methodology, with emphasis on the political system, the policy process, public finance management and private sector investment climate. Subsequent steps include an assessment of the role of external forces, effects on poverty, and operational implications.

Work on drivers of change has been so far carried out by DfID in Bangladesh, Cambodia, Georgia, Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, Pakistan, Zambia. Preliminary results show that donors’ assumptions about change and poverty reduction do not explain the patterns of actual change and poverty trends in Asia, and that African neo-patrimonialism, and the related state capture by informal patronage networks, may be fuelled by aid resources in aid-dependent countries.

More donors are interested in the same issues. Ongoing work in the OECD DAC Network on Governance (GOVNET) addresses the potential and limits of political economy analysis as a tool for enhancing aid effectiveness. In 2002 the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) launched a series of power analyses, covering both formal and informal power relations and structures, focused on actors, processes and institutions as a means to understand the societal preconditions that can direct programme planning at a country level. One of the sources of inspiration for this work has been the awareness of the limitations of democracy and human rights assessments too focused on formal structures (the constitution, the political system and other formal democratic institutions). Work carried out in Ethiopia, Kenya, Burkina Faso and Mali showed that the concept of power is fundamentally contested, thus calling into question the very definition of good governance as well, which is so influenced by perceptions of what power is and how should it be controlled.

The German Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ) is also engaged in addressing political change, by developing an analytical tool - the "Governance Questionnaire" - mapping out six arenas for the analysis of a political environment: the state-society relationship; the political system; the political culture, change agents and development paradigms; politics and gender; economic policy and the political frameworks of markets; and international integration.

Most of the different but converging elements of the current debate in the donor community on development and political change share a common concern about the need to understand political and institutional change, based on a better and more in-depth context-specific analysis. Pursuing such an agenda would imply a shift from systems where power is heavily concentrated and highly personalized to systems where power is more widely distributed, institutions more rule-based, policy-making more predictable and transparent, political mobilization based less on local, social identities than on common issues and interests. All of these objectives are part of the democracy building agenda as well. Addressing the close interplay between political systems, power-sharing mechanisms and policy-making seems to be the next challenge for development cooperation - and for democracy promotion as well.

Some preliminary conclusions on the lessons learned in applying these new approaches show that power and drivers of change analysis is potentially challenging, because it questions fundamental assumptions about how development happens. A recent review of such approaches points to the need to reconcile tensions between longer term political processes and incremental change with short-term spending and accountability imperatives (Dahl-Østergaard, Unsworth, Robinson and Jensen, 2005). In this perspective, the SoD framework can provide a relevant body of knowledge for fostering dialogue between local and external actors on a neglected dimension of aid: its relevance to political and democratic processes in partner countries.

4. Conclusions: The State of Democracy approach and donor discourses

IDEA's State of Democracy assessment framework was developed by taking into account a variety of different approaches adopted and applied by a variety of actors. In IDEA's *Handbook on Democracy Assessment* such approaches have been categorized on five types of frameworks: (a) human rights surveys; (b) governance assessments; (c) democracy indices; (d) democratic audits; and (e) economic and social assessments. Despite some commonalities in the issues addressed, the Handbook noted important differences in the purposes of each framework, aiming respectively at global comparisons; selection and monitoring of aid projects in the governance domain; exploring causal relationships between democracy and economic performance; raising public awareness and the level of public debate about democracy and its conditions, and guiding externally funded economic and social investment (Beetham, Bracking, Kearton and Weir, 2002:11-12).

Proposed as a sixth type of framework - mainly grounded on the experience of democratic audits - the Handbook is based on the assumption that a democracy assessment can make a contribution to the democratization process itself, provided that such a process is already underway and there is a significant commitment to it. In this perspective, democracy assessments can serve different purposes (Beetham, Bracking, Kearton and Weir, 2002:10), including:

- To raise public consciousness about what democracy involves, and how democratic ideas can be related to institutional arrangements.
- To give a more precise focus to popular concerns, by identifying both strengths and weaknesses of current democratic practice in a systematic manner.
- To contribute to public debate about ongoing reform, and to help identify priorities for a reform programme.
- To provide an instrument for assessing how effectively reforms are working in practice.

One of the main points of departure for the methodology is the local ownership of the analysis and its relevance for country-level debate for reforms. Such an innovative approach contrasted the main interests of donors at the time, consisting of developing a democracy and governance assessment tools for “external” assessors in order to provide policy advice for either aid allocation purposes or the design of initiatives in one of the various domains of the governance landscape.

Since the SoD methodology was first developed, however, some changes in donor approaches to the assessment of the political dimensions of development have been taking place. They call for revisiting the nature of donor assessments frameworks and their relationship with SoD.

Among the major constraints of such assessments there was their narrow focus on public sector reform, often lacking an understanding of the political economy dimensions of such issues. One of the major elements of innovation was the awareness of the need to go beyond normative standards. Good governance assessment frameworks typically sought to measure performance against a normative standard, and were based on either explicit or implicit models towards which assessed countries were encouraged to move. Another innovative aspect was the increasing awareness of the need to focus on formal and informal political institutions, behaviors and processes, to avoid the risk of neglecting relevant dimensions of non-formal processes that often shape political activity.

The time is ripe for donors to shift from measuring performance against a set of normative - and often unrealistic - goals towards understanding the local context with its incentives and disincentives for change. As Moore stressed, the former approach focused on performance measurement emphasized issues of capacity, transparency and accountability, defined short-term options for reform and identified champions/actors for reforms, with activities targeting the effectiveness of public institutions, the election cycle, and political coalition making.

The latter approach aimed at identifying the major variables shaping the functioning of national political systems, and assessing the main factors that can impede (pro-poor) change; the drivers of, and incentives/disincentives, for change, with a focus on institutionalization (i.e. the extent to which a particular pattern of behavior is regularized, routinized or predictable, and accords with public, transparent known rules - not necessarily embedded in some formal organization or procedure) and political competition (institutionalized in the above sense; a ‘civic’ competition, i.e. non-violent, tolerant; and open to large sections of the population). Such an approach recognizes the need to judge formal electoral democracy not by the extent to which it meets the norms of actual ‘rule by the people’, but according to how

far it provides an institutionalized means of organizing popular checks on the composition of the political elite and the policies it pursues (Moore, 2002).

We can draw a general conclusion on the potential of the SoD for donor agencies that could be further explored. It could meet what seems to be a demand emerging from some circles of the so-called donor community, by providing a body of knowledge on whose basis development cooperation actors may define more modest and realistic, but probably also more effective policies.

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