

Check against delivery

Bridging the State/Citizen divide: a role for politicians (not donors)

Comments by Vidar Helgesen, Secretary-General, International IDEA

**NORAD seminar on Voice and Accountability
23 April 2009**

The evaluation findings

- The synthesis report is very interesting and is presenting clear conclusions in a field which is not so clear-cut.
- What I find striking is the emphasis on political process, on power dynamics and on informal institutions.
- Also striking, not least given the said emphasis, is that the report does not articulate or advocate engagement with political parties and parliaments. In my view this reflects an absence and a gap in development cooperation and democracy assistance.

Political parties

- If one wants to engage with political processes and power dynamics, one cannot avoid political parties, since they are a key vehicle for politicians.
- In principle political parties are a bridge between the citizen and the state: a core function of parties is to transform popular expectations into implementable policies and then delivery by state institutions. This is a core function of political parties; again I say in principle.
- In practice parties are institutionally weak, poor on policy, elitist, male heavy, corrupt, marked by politics of patronage. I could go on.
- These weaknesses make political parties difficult to deal with in a development context - but the very same weaknesses are exactly why political parties are key:
 - o They encapsulate the formal and informal institutions of democracy and power dynamics
 - o Democracy cannot do without parties (in some form) and therefore we need to the parties that exist and not the parties we would like to have
- Parties, and parliaments, are of critical importance in the accountability chain.

Are authorities held accountable?

- Accountability is a buzz word in development cooperation these days. A key question is accountability by whom and to whom?
 - o Where are political parties and parliaments in the aid architecture?
 - o Development aid is largely focused on "governance" assistance to the executive branch of government on the one hand, and civil society support on the other hand. There is little attention to the political society inbetween: political parties and parliaments
- The Paris/Accra Agenda rightly talks of national ownership, but it tends to rest with the executive branch of government
- The same agenda talks of accountability, but it tends to be an accountability link between a recipient government and a donor government or governments. And frankly, based on essentially donor driven PRSPs and with conditionalities which further limit the space for national politics.

- What is the impact?
 - o Donors actually contribute to weakening the accountability chain and deepening a disconnect between the state and the citizen
 - o Basic functions of political parties and parliaments are at best not helped, at worst actually undermined by aid
 - o In polarized societies (and many aid dependent societies are polarized) aid can actually exacerbate polarization, if aid is seen as being of benefit to the governing party only. In countries coming out of conflict this can carry real risks.

How can the accountability chain be strengthened?

- First of all, donors need to understand national political dynamics. The evaluation is clear on this point and I think donors have improved a lot on this point in recent years.
- Secondly, donors need to engage with those who create and shape the national political dynamics. This is where donors regularly shy away, because national politics is often confusing and messy and even dirty. But this reality will not go away by donors pretending it's not there and sticking to very technical governance aid instead.
- Engaging with national political dynamics is the only way to try to transform them into processes that are more helpful for development.
- What we are really talking about here, is a need to transform development cooperation: to democratize development cooperation by starting to involve parties and parliaments in the aid architecture, not only civil society.
 - o Such a transformation will be challenging since recipient governments will not necessarily appreciate the more active involvement of parliaments in deliberations and decisions on aid allocation
 - o Such a transformation will also be challenging for the donors because it does not necessarily contribute to "aid effectiveness" narrowly understood. There is much to be said about parliaments, but effectiveness might not be the first word that comes to mind. In terms of democratic accountability and democratic ownership however, parliaments are at the heart.

A possible pilot case for Norway

- I have made the case that political parties are important and need to be taken more seriously in development cooperation. By this I am not merely thinking of political party assistance. Party assistance is of value and in my view should be strengthened, but it will be of little help if political parties are not actually truly involved in key political processes in the partner countries.
- As Norway is currently reforming its political party assistance model, it should look to creating synergies with the broader development cooperation.
- Let me end by suggesting a pilot case for Norway in improving interplay and exploring synergies between democracy and development assistance.
 - o A Norwegian development cooperation flagship is the "Oil for Development" programme, providing technical assistance in resource management.
 - o Well and good. But what is the real secret behind the Norwegian oil and gas success story? To some extent good technical solutions, yes. But I would argue that even more important is the politics. The political consensus on key issues, from regulatory frameworks for companies on the continental shelf to the revenue management, has created the necessary long-term stability and confidence.
 - o What Norway can offer to other resource-rich countries, therefore, is not only technical solutions but the political underpinnings of the

technical solutions. Providing merely technical assistance to polarized countries may even have detrimental effects if the national political reality is ignored.

- I therefore propose engaging Norwegian parties and parliamentarians in the OFU programme, drawing on the Parliamentary committee on Energy and other politicians with experience from the energy field, and seeking to contribute to political consensus-building in the countries where the OFU programme is operating.
- This would be no small challenge and it might be seen as risky business from a traditional development assistance point of view. But in my view it is more risky to ignore politics, not least in the field of energy.