FRIDE

How to Revitalise Democracy Assistance: Recipients' Views

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Introduction

Following the failure of many recent democratic transitions to consolidate smoothly, the controversies surrounding US policies during the Bush administration, and efforts by various governments around the world to stifle or reverse democratic gains, many have begun to question the value of democracy assistance programmes.

The past two decades have seen dramatic growth in the amount of such assistance – from both governmental and nongovernmental sources – and in the diversity of institutions that provide it. While the number of sources has grown, the total amount of funding available during the coming period may decline; therefore it is crucial that those funds that are allocated be spent in such a way as to maximise effectiveness.

In response to this challenging environment, FRIDE undertook a project designed to assess what stakeholders within target countries think about the democracy support agenda. Donors and non-governmental democracy promoters have for some years now insisted that they are committed to designing democracy policies that are more demand-led. Our project provides them with the most extensive input of information and opinions collected so far from this 'demand-side.' This synthesis report lays out the main concerns of local stakeholders, their judgements on why democracy aid is not working as well as might be the case and their views on how donors' strategies must adapt.

Under the rubric of our project, we carried out more than 500 interviews across 14 countries. We selected cases to include closed regimes (China, Belarus), semi-authoritarian states (Egypt, Morocco, Venezuela), post-transition cases (Ukraine, Georgia, Indonesia, Kenya, Ghana) and conflict/post-conflict states (Nigeria, Democratic Republic of Congo, Bosnia, Yemen). Tables 1 and 2 give a breakdown of our interviewees.

Our interviewees included representatives from governments and donors, but our research was especially oriented to garnering the views of civil and political society within recipient countries. We focus mainly on civil society support, but relay concerns over other sectors of political aid too. Our project in essence gives these local stakeholders voice to express their perceptions and suggestions as to how democracy support can be made more effective. Detail on our research methodology is included in an appendix to this report; case study reports are available at www.fride.org.

This report synthesises the results of our project. The report does not offer a schematic, academic overview of democracy assistance. It is not a comprehensive 'state of the art' assessment of democracy support or an analysis of models of political change. Nor was our project aimed at contributing to the already-rich debate over project evaluation methodology. More modestly, the report presents the main concerns to have emerged from our extensive range of fieldwork and discussions with local actors involved in the democracy agenda.

We are not concerned here with offering a systematic comparison between different types of donors. The differences between donors are a vitally important subject of enquiry, but are not the prime concern in this particular report. We cluster a series of preoccupations that local stakeholders see as applying largely across the board – even if one donor may be slightly guiltier of a particular shortcoming than another. (A wide range of donor initiatives were covered in our case studies).

We are not reporting local concerns as objectively correct, or saying that we necessarily agree with them. Indeed, one point stressed in this report is that there are clear contradictions in recipients' views. Civil society's perceptions are on occasions patently mistaken. We do not wish to sanction the merely self-interested complaints of grantees. But, if donors are serious in their commitment to render democracy support more demand-led, the perceptions we report

are those that must represent the starting point for such a change in strategy. Donors may react entirely defensively to the criticism aimed at them; but then their rhetoric about demand-led local ownership of projects risks ringing hollow.

Many of the concerns to emerge from our discussions with local stakeholders relate to relatively familiar issues to do with the way that programming is carried out – donors' bias in favour of a small group of well-established civil society organisations not organically linked to local society, short-term funding horizons and rigid reporting requirements. We report the persistence of these well-known frustrations, but orientate most of our attention to the broader set of issues where our consultations uncover changing deliberations. Four particular concerns emerge related to the broad political context within which donors implement political aid, namely:

– that donor agendas still fail to link political reform objectives to other local concerns;
– that much democracy assistance deepens more than it ameliorates the kind of domestic polarisation that militates against democratic deepening;
– that donors have allowed regimes to neuter reform dynamics in efforts to link state and civil society; and
– that donors' other policy strands need to be far more tightly dovetailed to democracy objectives to provide the latter with sufficient political backing.

In structuring our findings around these issues, relative to existing overviews of democracy aid we hone in more tightly on the question of why the current juncture is particularly problematic for democracy support and what can be done to exit the current widely-perceived slump in its fortunes.

General observations on programming

Despite the controversies that have arisen in relation to democracy promotion in recent years, no more than a handful of our interviewees felt that support for political reform should be reduced. In most of our countries, the most potent complaint was over the scarcity of democracy assistance resources, not their surfeit.

Our fieldwork reinforced many of the generic 'lessons learnt' of the last decade. The interviews uncovered a range of familiar concerns; issues that democracy promoters have been aware of for some time, but it appears continue to engender local disappointment. These issues are not 'news'; nevertheless it is worth recapitulating their salience very briefly.

These concerns concentrate around a cluster of programming issues that are pertinent specifically to NGOs:

Table 1: Interviews conducted, overview

Local recipients (non-govt)	Local recipients (govt)	Donors (non-govt)	Donors (govt)	Donors (multilat.)	Total
283	50	78	104	28	543

Table 2: Donors interviewed, by country of origin

USA / Canada	Europe	Australia	Middle East	International	Non-specified	Total
42	98	2	3	37	28	210

– Civil society organisations' calls for more small, flexible grants distributed directly by embassies, the most welcomed form of funding delivery across our case studies. Local stakeholders still want donors to get out of national capitals and to implement programmes that are allowed to change over time as circumstances evolve. They also want greater flexibility not to have to publicise the support they receive from international organisations.

– The need for donors to focus much more assertively on the lack of internal democracy within the NGOs they support. This is a change that has long been called for, but our fieldwork reveals that in many cases the problem is if anything getting worse. The hierarchical and personalistic nature of many civil society organisations supported by external actors continues to be a major de-legitimising factor for the democracy agenda.

– A frequent complaint is that funds are forthcoming for 'projects' that civil society organisations have to, in some sense, 'invent' rather than for their normal day-to-day functioning and core business. There is broad agreement on the need to shift from product to process, from 'Western' values to 'local' values. But translating this into programmable principles is not judged to have advanced significantly – indeed it invariably remains unclear what this routinely repeated goal really means.

– Some concern emerges that donors can appear 'behind the curve', with models rooted especially in the revolutions of central and eastern Europe, when many of the ways in which civic groups organise and communicate have changed significantly in the last twenty years. Growing criticism is directed at training initiatives in this domain. This is especially true of training on elections, party development, manifestos etc. that local actors deride as 'pre-formatted' and of limited practical use. In the majority of our cases funds for media training have been poured into organisations that have not proved viable over the longer-term. Basic capacity and organisational training is now seen as less useful than it was in the first decade of democracy assistance.

– Too much funding still goes to and through Western NGOs; many of our interviewees complained of being shoe-horned into arbitrary 'networks' at the behest of Western NGOs charged by donors with channeling support to amalgams of local stakeholders. Such a tendency is seen as stifling local vibrancy of small and adaptable civic organisations. Western NGOs are still seen as heavy-handed in dictating terms and taking the lion's share of funding when donors support these big international NGOs to build bridges to smaller local organisations. In Nigeria, for example, the first complaint most local organisations list when consulted regarding democracy aid is the amount of funding that still goes to non-Nigerian NGOs and consultants, despite this having been recognised as a problem for many years.

In addition to these issues of specific relevance to NGOs, slightly broader concerns also emerged:

– The need for greater constancy and continuity. We found many cases of external democracy promoters suddenly changing priorities in a way that disrupts reform dynamics. In Georgia, funding for media training from a number of donors was stopped only one or two years after the Rose revolution as it was felt that in this sector reform was complete; this training has now had to be restarted, in some cases once again from a very low base starting point. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), donors are felt to have switched from the issue of child soldiers to that of sexual violence as a herd, leaving local organisations flummoxed. In Ghana donors have in a relatively short period moved en masse, it is felt by locals, from parliamentary to local government support, as the latter emerges as the latest panacea. In Bosnia local actors also lament that donors have been too changeable, moving from one priority to another in a way that has lead to harmful discontinuities. Across our countries a prominent call was for donors to end 'stop-and-start' fluctuations in their funding patterns and offer longer-term funding horizons. This is because recipients want both fewer strings attached to funds and more of an engagement with long term impact.

– The urgent need for better coordination between different democracy promoters. In countries with

relatively high levels of funding like Georgia, Ukraine and Bosnia, we found that there has been such a large number of training and twinning initiatives forthcoming that recipient institutions are not even able to find enough senior personnel to attend many sessions. Ghana is a case of good practice in donor coordination, with like-minded donors coordinating to useful effect in a number of thematic areas and inviting civil society representatives to participate in this exercise: the value of this to local stakeholders emerges clearly from our case study. As part of enhanced coordination, recipients highlighted that they particularly valued cross-country learning projects, calling for greater coherence between different target states as well as between donors within a single state. Very prosaically, it is widely felt that if donors could at least harmonise their myriad reporting requirements this would be of enormous benefit to local organisations.

Hands on, hands off?

Beyond such well-worn programme-level concerns, a first crucial substantive dilemma to emerge from our fieldwork relates to the way in which the agenda for democracy support is set and controlled. Civil society organisations and representatives of state institutions unite in calling for priorities to be set locally. Local stakeholders want greater say over thematic priorities and less burdensome rules for justifying how they spend foreign funds.

Often donors are missing promising 'access points' because they are, it is felt, still unwilling to cede control over thematic preferences. In Egypt, funding support for election monitoring has been sizeable, even though locals see limited potential in this area compared with other more neglected areas. In Morocco, local actors raised as one of their priority pleas the need for them to have a greater say in project design rather than being presented with *fait accompli* themes under donors' calls for proposals. In Nigeria the issue of party and campaign financing has been overlooked,

despite this being one of the most obvious problems constantly raised by local actors. Several donors are trying to move beyond reactive calls for proposals, but this does not yet seem to have made a tangible dent in these local perceptions.

In Ukraine, the key 'blockages' to reform – a fractious parliament and parties – are precisely those on which donors are reticent to fully engage. In Belarus, projects were shoehorned under a heading of 'children's rights initiatives' to meet a predetermined European Commission thematic priority, when such an issue was felt by local democrats to have little relevance to the specific factors blocking democratic reform in Belarus. It is, naturally, hardly surprising that aid recipients should want higher amounts of money with fewer strings attached. However, in turn, their own demands on donors are also onerous. On the one hand, they seek a more hands-off approach from external democracy promoters. On the other hand, they excoriate the latter for being insufficiently hands-on when it comes to monitoring the use of funds by unscrupulous, rival recipient organisations. A frequently heard criticism is that much money is thrown at NGOs and government ministries ostensibly for reform projects with no monitoring of where it goes.

All reports on democracy aid highlight recipients' complaints over bureaucratic funding procedures. In our fieldwork for this project we were struck by the prevalence of the inverse concern, namely that with democracy aid under more intense critical scrutiny it must demonstrate that it is achieving better value for money. Across our case studies, local stakeholders were scathingly vitriolic of Western donors' failure to live up the rhetoric on transparency when in comes to justifying how they allocate their own funds. It is widely perceived that Western (and indeed other donor) money is invariably distributed through personal contacts rather than on the basis of merit. In Yemen a consortium of civil society groups even lodged a formal complaint with the European Commission in Brussels to protest at the influence of personalistic favouritism in funding decisions. This situation may be fine for the small number of civil society organisations

(CSOs) favoured by donors, but leaves others more embittered towards the democracy support agenda.

This situation calls on external democracy promoters to tread a tightrope. All donors are fully aware of the need to simplify funding procedures where possible. However, at the other extreme, 'cash in a briefcase' solutions benefit a lucky few, but for the broader constituency of civic organisations they risk further undermining the credibility of international democracy support. In the new environment, democracy support must excel not only in the ends it seeks but also in the form it follows.

So, in Egypt, for example, we uncovered strident calls for donors to monitor more effectively how money is spent. Aid recipients that end up buying fancy flats and cars undermine the whole credibility of the democracy assistance exercise, and our interlocutors judged that this problem has not meaningfully improved in recent years in Egypt. Moreover, in Egypt, our interviewees told us that funding should follow local needs assessments but also that they wanted a clearer and more proactive identification of new partners and themes from donors.

A fine line exists: if donors set the priorities, they are accused of being insensitive; if they follow local demands they risk shoring up a self-perpetuating cottage industry of NGOs. Civil society organisations are often contradictory in wanting less control over their own projects, but more donor monitoring of other recipients' funds.

Interestingly, donors' new talk of broader 'participatory evaluations' found little resonance amongst our interviewees. Civil society organisations, perhaps unsurprisingly, see a decentralisation of decision-making and priority-setting in democracy support as a means of empowering their own agendas. While in general it is necessary to move in this direction, donors must also be aware that simply handing over such responsibilities to 'local ownership' is no easy, neutral panacea. What emerges from our case studies is the fierce competition for resources amongst different local actors. Donors should be cautioned to realise that at least some civic organisations continue to think of 'local ownership' as referring to *their own* power, not the input of a broader community.

Gaps between 'concrete needs' and reform aims

It emerges forcefully from our interviews that civil society organisations most appreciate local-level projects that assist self-organisation based around issues of practical relevance to individual citizens. Local stakeholders perceived that the democracy agenda has become increasingly disconnected from such concerns – and that this is one of the reasons for it struggling to recoup esteem amongst ordinary people.

Some donors feel these negative perceptions are on this point not entirely fair or reflective of reality. However, to address this area of criticism it is imperative that democracy promoters renew their efforts to make sure that macro-institutional aims and templates speak to people's day-to-day priorities.

This is important for gaining at least a modicum of traction in the most closed polities. In China, interviewees argued that donors must build governance issues around local concerns. These present opportunities that have not been taken advantage of, such as with the milk powder scandal – such cases can demonstrate in a very concrete and real sense the negative impact of governance pathologies. Small scale civil society projects on practical matters have been the most productive in China. In this difficult case reformers' judgement is that beyond a certain level of politicisation foreign funding becomes counter-productive, leading to arrests and closures of grant recipients' operations. A practical focus can help get

the necessary buy-in from local officials. A key for donors is to know which individual officials are predisposed to facilitating reform-oriented cooperation around practical issues. Similarly, rule of law cooperation offers a promising focus in this case, to the extent that Chinese leaders have been keen to work on empowering citizens to monitor corruption (for example though an Open Government regulation): the regime is keen to know how better to respond to citizens' grievances to stave off instability.

In Africa, donors have made important changes to their funding strategies. In Nigeria donors have been linking governance and grass roots development efforts, funding initiatives for civil society organisations to monitor how the central government spends debt relief, building local coalitions for reform between disparate sets of actors, and to mitigate conflict engendered by electoral processes.

But in general, across Africa political parties and parliaments are still not as systematically included as they would like in donor projects on the monitoring of budgets and poverty reduction strategies – an issue that acutely exercises local opinion. In Kenya, in the aftermath of the violent 2008 elections donors have focused on conflict prevention, 'community harmony', electoral reform and the question of impunity within their democracy aid profiles. While our interviewees broadly welcomed such efforts, they expressed concern that resources and diplomatic efforts were being too heavily diverted to these immediate political particularities, to the detriment of citizen-level governance concerns.

In some of our Arab cases we found growing concerns over the gulf between donors and local actors on issues of liberal rights such as homosexuality and gender equality. Many Arab democracy activists see Western donors as over-stressing these issues. In turn, donors are still shocked that some of their potential partners on democracy can be so illiberal on these rights questions. Donors should not compromise on such fundamental principles and rights, but they might help assuage tensions by shifting priority to the kinds of

social and economic governance issues more directly pertinent to Arab citizens – a young population in North Africa and the Middle East is most angered at regimes' kleptocracy because this impedes everyday opportunity.

As an aside, donors in the Arab world told us that – contrary to commonly held perceptions – they do not actively exclude Islamists from their projects but rather that the latter are simply not applying for funds because they see little of concrete relevance to them under the standard template of Western support. In spite of this, however, donors across the spectrum remained reluctant even to engage personally with Islamist actors, and frequently excluded them from technical assistance programmes.

In Venezuela, we found that the need for tangible improvement in social rights is an area in which the international community has lost ground to the Chávez regime. Our interviewees rejected the often-made claim that more than a decade of Chávez rule has engendered fundamentally different definitions of democracy amongst Venezuelans. Rather, they insisted that democracy projects must more pragmatically demonstrate that they can offer a better model in relation to improving social rights – an area of policy which is still widely perceived as the regime's relative strong point. This goal is not helped by international actors rarely getting out of Caracas, into the areas where Chávez has built up strong constituencies of support. Local civil society organisations call on the international community to devise projects that approach political reform from this 'social angle', rather than from the overtly politicised angle that has so far failed to make an impact and is perceived by many to be distant from everyday concerns.

Of course, this complaint over the lack of practical relevance is an easy and obvious point to make. But recipients and other local civil society actors are not always fully consistent in their own views. They urge external actors to dovetail their political aid programmes with concrete day-to-day citizen needs. But they are also quick to admonish donors when they

believe that democracy aid is mutating into overly soft and apolitical development assistance. Democracy promoters have a thin line to walk on this question. Ghana shows the need for such balance. Here, support for parliament has been linked specifically to capacities to monitor expenditure under poverty reduction strategies (including the vital issue of natural resource revenues) and has incorporated civil society partners. Some interviewees in Ghana actually felt this was a weak point of international support, which they saw as too aligned to development agendas rather than bolstering the more general political power of the parliament vis-à-vis the executive. Ghana also shows that neither must electoral support be entirely vilified: this is a case where support for election monitoring and an independent electoral commission has paid off, helping put in place a cornerstone of the country's recent democratic advances. Here local stakeholders do not seek less of this type of assistance but rather more linkage between it and the type of challenges that emerge in the immediate post-election period.

Indonesia is another example of a case where donors have invested in effective service delivery to an extent that local stakeholders now fret that underlying political problems are being arbitrarily wished away by the international community. One Bosnian activist complained that having to follow donors' very practical priorities had turned civil society organisations into 'consulting companies not NGOs'.

A balance between the 'political' and the 'practical' would, on this evidence, seem apposite. Local stakeholders themselves need to help by ironing out the contradiction in their own positions – often in the same breath they in effect berate donors for being both too political and insufficiently political. Democracy aid must speak to issues of everyday import to citizens, but must also be in essence political.

Struggling to temper fragmentation

A concern raised by local civil society organisations across our case studies is that democracy aid often inadvertently deepens polarisation within civil society itself. Criticisms have been voiced that democracy assistance has struggled to find a way of tempering the kind of fragmentation of social and political actors that militates against reform prospects. Of course, vibrant contestation is a rightful part of democratisation; without some degree of fractious political competition, democratisation would rarely advance. What local actors call for is not so much 'soft engagement' with the regime as greater understanding of the need to avoid deepening fissures amongst different pro-reform players. The perception exists among local stakeholders that donor strategies are rarely conducive to a necessary widening of the pro-reform constituency.

Georgia demonstrates the challenge of including all opposition figures within democracy support programmes. In this case, parliamentary programmes were seen as unduly pro-government as key opposition figures absented themselves from the parliament in protest at the government's increasing centralisation of political power. Donors were critical of this opposition strategy, but did not adapt their programmes to ensure these were all-inclusive.

A variation on this concern arises over inter-generational tension. In Egypt, the influential younger generation of activists that is increasingly splintering from old-guard NGO leaders complain that they are not being supported. A dilemma for donors is how to bring this new breed into support networks – these are the people who played a lead role in triggering the protests that erupted in 2005 and the fact that they now risk being lost from view augurs particularly badly for future reform momentum. Some donors express a desire to switch away from trying to back 'reformers'

within the ruling party to backing looser and more disparate networks of younger activists, operating through Facebook and other media. To date, these remain aspirations rather than implemented aims, however. Moreover, the difficulty will be in embracing such networks without diverting attention away from the parliament, where reform remains imperative.

The problems of polarisation can be most serious in the more closed political systems. Where political parties are not allowed at all, civil society takes on the role of the opposition. Regimes then complain that CSOs are not concerned with furthering a general civic spirit but rather with 'getting the government out.' In many cases they are correct in this concern, but it is a result of their own tightened grip over political society.

But our fieldwork does offer some more positive examples of how this crucial area can be moved forward, modestly. Several grants in Ghana have succeeded in tempering polarisation, supporting quiet mediation behind the scenes between opposing and previously deeply adversarial political parties. Our report on Ghana suggests the key is for donors to offer a forum where parties have scope not to 'play to the gallery' of their respective constituencies. A generally acknowledged 'good practice' is for consultative bodies to be available for different actors to raise concerns and new issues before differences become set in stone.

Neutering by governments

One related lesson learnt in previous years is that democracy aid must seek to engage 'insiders' and avoid merely fomenting antagonism between the state and countervailing power. As one of our case studies points out, civil society leaders must realise that the democracy agenda is unlikely to succeed if it starts from the premise that all members of the political elite are ill-meaning, corrupt villains.

This lesson has been taken on board. Indeed, the challenge today derives from governments' ability to neutralise the genuine reform potential of many democracy assistance initiatives. A major complaint from our interviewees is that external democracy promoters have been insufficiently attentive to this problem. The issue here is that the way in which governments have been incorporated into reform projects has enabled them to smother the pro-democracy potential of such initiatives. Donors are correct to insist that the democracy agenda is as much about strengthening state as civic capacity. But the way this is being done tilts the balance too far away from the latter.

In Egypt, those donors who did attempt some tentative engagement with the opposition Muslim Brotherhood were leant on heavily by the regime and in response have stepped back. Local stakeholders are highly critical of the fact that European Commission and US Middle East Partnership Initiative projects on judicial and administrative reform are agreed with the government and include mainly regime-backed partners. Democratic recession in Egypt is leading to reductions in funding, for example under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, when locals say exactly the opposite reaction is required. Funding for election monitoring is felt by many activists to have been a waste, because the international community unhesitatingly accepts the results of profoundly and expertly manipulated polls. Indeed, monitoring has been carried out in such alignment with the regime that it has merely served to provide the latter with a pretext for restricting domestic monitoring (after the 2005 elections the Egyptian government crucially reversed a provision that allowed judges scrutiny over elections). Interviewees in Egypt were also strongly critical of budgetary support provided directly to the regime and support for GONGOs; they do not accept donors' arguments that backing GONGOs offers a useful way of engaging governments in reform-oriented initiatives. In Yemen, donors have funded women's rights NGOs closely linked to the ruling party, to the chagrin of fast-rising Islamist groups; at the same time they have

followed government strictures to cease funding a small number of more critical and independent organisations. This is a particularly narrow approach given the density and vibrancy of civic networks in Yemen. Donors have also declined to support civic bodies in the south of Yemen, at the behest of the central government – the latter fearing that such organisations agitate for succession.

In Indonesia, the formally democratic government neutered the possibility of independent externally-supported election observation in 2009. Local civic leaders complain that government restrictions are now as bad as under Suharto; even allowing for some exaggeration in this claim, the problem is clearly under-played by donors that now accord ministries an effective veto over individual political aid projects. Indonesian CSOs concur that a balance is needed between the demand and supply sides of democracy-building – between civic advocacy and state capacity – but insist that the balance has shifted far too far towards the latter in recent years. They complain at being lent on heavily by donors to reach arbitrary consensus with the government, simply so that donors can 'tick their box' demonstrating positive linkages between state and civil society. In addition, Indonesia is another case where, at the behest of government strictures, most donors have remained shy of supporting key Islamic civil society organisations, with the exception of a handful of innovative foundations.

In China, disappointment abounds that years of externally funded projects in support of village democracy have not produced lasting gains. Indeed as the regime has retracted on this issue, so donors have largely given up. This provides an example of a long-recognised problem: where donors fail to manufacture connections between different 'arenas' of reform, apparently promising avenues can remain isolated islands and be suffocated of their genuinely reformist thrust by regimes. In China it was widely felt amongst our interlocutors that the Ministry of Civil Affairs, the most liberal of ministries, has become more nervous of working with foreign organisations.

In Morocco, judicial reform projects are widely dismissed as being too elitist and for having failed to incorporate civil society elements. Local civic organisations criticise the rule of law support that has been forthcoming to date for being oriented towards those aspects of judicial reform of most interest to Western governments and the Moroccan regime (such as investment contract law), while neglecting the issues of access to justice that are prioritised by social actors.

In Ukraine, local stakeholders berate donors for channeling 'reform' aid unconditionally to ministries that Ukrainians know not to be committed to reform. Georgia provides another striking case of bad practice: post-Rose revolution governance initiatives directly funded the office of the president, including through paying the salaries of key personnel. In both countries local organisations expressed concerns that donors' post-transition switch to direct budget support was being implemented in a way that clipped civil society's wings rather than being a vehicle for enhanced locally-driven accountability (as donors claimed).

Government interference can neutralise the benefits of key initiatives even in relatively successful reformist states. One example here is the huge amount of external support given to Ghana's Serious Fraud Office that has suffered persistent government interference. An interesting observation from some of our cases is that linking projects so tightly to government backing compounds the problem of inconstancy: many initiatives falter as those involved holding political posts get moved on with high frequency.

A cross-cutting finding from our fieldwork is that local stakeholders want donors to be less risk-averse. They want external democracy promoters to be prepared to take risks sometimes, even if mistakes are made. Their general feeling is that most funders now 'play it too safe'. In countries like Bosnia and Georgia this is listed as one of the main factors that militates against unblocking political atrophy. Local civil society organisations tend to like the willingness of smaller foundations to go out on a limb occasionally. This does not so much call for overt political belligerence, but

rather a willingness to try new things, new approaches, new partners, as potential means of circumventing regime obstacles. The judgement is that as regimes have become smarter at neutralising political aid the international community has reacted by withdrawing into a shell of insipidness rather than showing a willingness to experiment and be more ambitious in its funding structures.

To paraphrase one civil society activist: locals are not necessarily waiting around for the international community to show 'respect' for the 'shared values' of the respective autocratic regime. We picked up much concern that such well-meaning guiding maxims can end up seeming rather hollow in the eyes of CSOs in target sates.

Lack of political backing

A crucial and more political observation was made by a large number of our interviewees: much more valuable than slightly increased amounts of money, or slightly changed funding rules, would be more effective international pressure on regimes to loosen civil society and other laws. Without such changes, there is now enough accumulated experience to suggest that funding invariably has a relatively limited potential. Local stakeholders are, almost without exception, looking for a much tighter linkage between project funding and the nature of diplomatic relations between donor governments and non-democratic regimes. The lack of such a connection is almost universally seen as a major cause of democracy assistance's increasingly disappointing record.

Stand-alone democracy projects are judged to have less potential if the issue of political reform does not permeate the full panoply of foreign policy instruments – trade, energy, development. The macro context of democracy policy is seen today as of relatively greater weight in part because many stakeholders feel they are

not acutely in need of training on organising and communications techniques from the West. Indeed, recent experience in many target states suggests that their civil societies are *ahead* in terms of using new communications technology such as Facebook and Twitter for political purposes. Less of a premium is placed than it was 20 years ago on basic information sharing and teaching communications-organisational techniques – the web almost provides information overload in some cases – leaving stakeholders looking for more 'macro' level backing from donors.

In Bosnia, democrats are critical of European governments in particular for being ambivalent on the issue of constitutional reform. Without reform to Dayton structures, they argue, individual projects cannot be expected to function more effectively. Locals complain about donors accepting the way in which Dayton provides a kind of amnesty cover for hardliners, who actually benefit from outside funds. On the crucial issue of police reform, technical aid and capacity-building projects were actually undercut by the international community's decision at the diplomatic level to accept a massively diluted police reform in 2008. Again, there is a challenging duality in the local message: democratic moderates want political reform but also sometimes warn donors not to lose sight of 'real issues' in debates over a post-Dayton constitution. They complain at the coercive use of the 'Bonn powers', but are also impatient at the barriers to deeper political reform and the softness of the international community on this question. Bosnia provides an alarming example of the disconnect between the project and political level of external actors' strategies.

In Georgia, support from several donors for boosting technical drafting capacity in the preparation of a new constitution was contradicted by unconditional support for the government that constantly postponed such a reformed document. Moreover, Georgia shows how a failure to address broad, structural security dilemmas can utterly undermine the utility of democracy assistance projects working at the micro or technical level. Russia-related security questions

ensured that the government put democratic deepening on hold; donors did nothing to protest at the diversion of state resources into weapons procurement.

In Egypt donors have been passive on the impending succession question; Western governments are of their own admission largely 'waiting to see what happens' as president Mubarak prepares to step down, despite the associated uncertainty filtering down to the project level. Local actors do not want direct meddling, but are critical of this ambivalence. The regime's upcoming, more restrictive law for registering civil society associations has not been strongly challenged by outside powers: local stakeholders say that pressure on this would be vastly more important than increases in project funding. Once again, there is a thin line between local actors' different demands: Egyptian civil society representatives want diplomatic pressure but in the next breath can be highly critical of democracy being imposed and of coercive conditionality. They can clearly not have it both ways. The prospective leverage over the Egyptian elite is not more or less aid, but the country's prestige as a regional player – this is where civic leaders feel that international leverage remains under-explored.

In Morocco, a prominent criticism is that donors fail to address, through their democracy projects, the political economy of reform. Democratic reform is blocked in Morocco – as elsewhere – due in significant measure to the economic power of state patrons. Yet this area remains unexplored by democracy assistance. In Morocco a very strong feeling is evident that the money offered through political aid is less important than democracy support opening the way for a long term partnership, diplomatic support and information sharing; recipients express disappointment that these more nebulous aspects are still not forthcoming to the extent that could 'incentivise' reform.

In Yemen, security concerns have quite evidently softened Western criticism of the Saleh regime and have left democracy assistance projects bereft of political backing. For example, a significant amount of parliamentary training has been funded, but its value has been undercut since elections have been postponed since 2008 – and indeed by a European election monitoring mission that, explicitly against pleas from local stakeholders, issued a relatively uncritical report on the last elections ('So much for listening to local actors' was the justifiable response from Yemeni civil society).

The need for counter-terrorist assistance has also engendered reluctance on the part of the international community to press for the Indonesian government to cease frustrating many democracy projects. The same security services supported for counter-terrorism cooperation now monitor foreign aid with increasing menace. Moreover, Indonesia has become far less dependent on aid and is now a major player in the G20 on issues related to the financial crisis, diminishing the prospect of effective external pressure.

Venezuela is another case that backs up these assertions. Our interlocutors here were largely at one in insisting that the change they would most like to see from the international community is a stronger diplomatic defence of basic human rights and freedoms. The local perception is that most countries, and especially key partners such as Spain and France, have gone silent on Venezuela's creeping authoritarianism. More robust criticism and engagement is required, with Chávez now tightening laws against foreign funding.

Similarly, in the DRC much useful funding has supported the distribution of radios and journalists' training, but then no pressure has been exerted when the government has interrupted the transmission of a number of radio stations. And in Nigeria a lot of funding has gone into the national elections commission despite this functioning under the tutelage of the government and doing little to temper electoral manipulation. In such circumstances Nigerian civil society organisations doubt the utility of such ostensible capacity-building while the international community takes an accommodating view of the government's perversion of the electoral process.

More robust diplomatic engagement is not synonymous with the use of coercive political

conditionality. There was no consensus from our interviewees on whether democratic sanctions would be useful or counter-productive. Many pointed out that the issue here is not so much the actual hard economic cost of sanctions but the matter of reputation: if external pressure can be better attuned to 'reputational cost' rather than economic punishment, then it may play a helpful role.

Regime-type variations

The factors covered to this point apply across the different types of regime included within our project. At the margins, however, there are several considerations that are peculiar to regime-type.

Post-transition scenarios

In key post-transition contexts such as Ukraine and Georgia a general feeling exists that political reform aid was being reduced too soon after transition. It was also felt that in such situations donors tended too precipitately to shift funds from civil society to government. In Ukraine, for example, it was widely argued that basic democratic education is still needed, but that funders had moved prematurely beyond such efforts to backing state-level capacity-building, following the Orange reformers as they themselves moved into government.

Likewise in Indonesia donors shifted away from civil society support after a second set of elections six years after formal transition. Some donors do now recognise they moved in undue haste and need to correct their course in this case. In Kenya, donors are only now moving back towards civil society support, after having similarly shifted funds away from civic bodies into state-led governance projects after formal transition in the early 2000s. And Ghana is another post-transition case where civil society actors complain loudly (and arguably to an exaggerated degree) at donors' overly heavy bias in favour of state-linked projects. The

judgement is that donors err in thinking that such countries have moved on to relatively technical 'second phase' reform challenges when, in the eyes of local civic leaders, fundamental underlying political restrictions remain.

Closed regimes

The particular sensitivities of operating in closed authoritarian regimes have intensified; it is here where the broader normative defensiveness of the democracy agenda is acutely felt. Here, our interviewees warned, donors need to present aid as 'non-ideological'. And they need to undertake better risk assessments of who could be harmed by funding projects.

The case of Belarus reiterates many of the general lessons highlighted in this report but also reveals several that are specific to democracy promoters' particularly acute challenge of operating in firmly closed regimes. Donors' co-funding rules make little sense in a country like Belarus where matching sources of funds are simply not available. The requirement that NGOs seek formal registration can backfire, as forcing activists out into the open may simply help the KGB monitor their operations. This has occurred in Belarus through donors' insistence that local organisations publish details of their activities with full transparency on websites: in locals' eyes this is almost an invitation to be repressed. Donors have also failed to spot 'fake' civic organisations run by the KGB. Operating projects under the protection of multilateral bodies is felt to be especially necessary in a case like Belarus. The type of conditionality used has been perverse: donors have threatened to remove political support for civil society unless the government agrees to register independent organisations, when this is exactly the result the Lukashenko regime desires!

The degree of political control in Belarus encourages local democrats to advocate engagement under the rubric of very mundane local issues, such as water supply issues or equipping schools; although, confusingly, the same interviewees despair that little can be hoped for until the Lukashenko regime is changed 'from the top down'. Support for online media

is especially sought, given the tightness of control over standard media outlets. Crucially, support for political reform must be seen, Belorussian activists insist, in tandem with the fostering of a national identity: backing for projects on Belorussian identity and culture can help prise the country away from Russian influence and thus open up greater prospects for political change. A fundamental US-European division over the question of whether directly to back the opposition is seen by local organisations to have cancelled out any positive impact of external support.

Semi-authoritarian regimes

A crucial observation to emerge from our research is just how acute the problem of governments neutering reform projects has become in semi-autocratic states. A specificity of these states relates to just how effective semi-authoritarians have been in neutralising democracy assistance. Disappointment prevails over donors' apparent lack of willingness to acknowledge and respond to this new reality. The widespread feeling is that this failure has provided a new veneer of legitimacy to semi-autocracy as a regime-type – the prejudicial impact of which extends well beyond the familiar funding shortfalls in a few target countries.

Conflict and post-conflict states

In our African cases local stakeholders cautioned that donors must not over-do support for 'traditional' groups as a supposed panacea for mitigating conflict dynamics; more political, activist groups are critical of donors for moving too far in this direction. In the DRC civil society representatives express some concern that traditional forms of identity and organisation are now being prioritised when these may sit uneasily with democratic standards and the prospects of building linkages between different ethnic and linguistic groups. The DRC also shows that the issue of decentralisation in post-conflict contexts is particularly complex: here the government complains that international funds have actually been drawn too heavily into conflict-related local community projects in the remote areas beset by periodic flare ups – to the detriment, state reformers insist, of building necessary state capacity at the centre.

The concern from local stakeholders is not over elections per se but the ordering of different levels of polls: the strong advice is for local elections to be held first and then to work up through the different levels of elections to the presidential – exactly the opposite order encouraged by the international community. Self-declared 'reformers' within the commercial sector in the DRC say they have been neglected and actually had their international support reduced in recent years, even though the political economy of resource management is one of the most serious obstacles to peace and democratic deepening in DRC. Polls in Nigeria show that citizens want fairer elections not 'local' alternatives to free elections.

Conflict mediation projects in Yemen have been organised around tribal structures, and this has proven controversial with both civil society organisations and the government (the head of one donor, NDI, was obliged to resign). In Bosnia democrats lament the precipitate reduction in democracy aid from the late 1990s, in preference for conflict-related activities bereft of genuine reform dimensions – for example, border controls that are often presented as part of democracy funding. Similarly in Georgia, funding has increased for displaced persons after the 2008 war, leading some to complain of democracy funding being used inappropriately for security related questions. A specific concern in post-conflict states is that donors can flood the market with lots of bureaucratically heavy projects that the recipient state and civil society simply does not have the institutional capacity to deal with.

Conclusion

Many of the findings of our project will be familiar to those who have followed the evolution of debates over democracy assistance. But at least some of the opinions forwarded by local stakeholders introduce some nuance to key elements of received wisdom. Three over-arching issues emerge from our detailed case study research:

First, local stakeholders do not want donors to give up the ghost. A sense of realism is required that democracy aid is unlikely to have dramatic results. In many states the obstacles to reform may be too great even where donors are playing a courageous and well-proportioned role. Democracy aid may be limited to tilling the soil in preparation for incremental change over the long-term. However, despite all the difficulties of recent years, and erstwhile 'overstretch' of some Western governments' democracy support policies, there is patent demand for more donors to do more. People from across the different regions react angrily when Western governments and experts claim there is no 'local demand' for political reform, which local stakeholders feel is invariably a pretext for inaction.

Second, civic leaders want better linkages between democracy assistance narrowly defined and the broader set of policies and influences pertinent to political reform. This was probably the most potent message conveyed to our researchers: democracy aid must be seen as part of a more holistic whole. In many target countries a view prevails among democracy promoters that they, the donors, must wait 'until the time is right', without them doing much to hasten that 'right time'.

Third, local stakeholders' own views are in some crucial respects beset by serious inconsistencies. They demand much improvement from donors but themselves are not entirely consistent in what they want. Indeed, our project reinforces the well-known point that civil society is not itself a coherent entity. Referring to the need for 'locally set priorities' does not in this sense take us that far towards definitive policy solutions. In democracy support the angels are not all on one side. At the very least, local stakeholders are asking donors to walk some very thin lines between competing, and often contradictory, concerns. If demand-led democracy support is to prosper local stakeholders must shape-up just as much as the donors.

Appendix: Methodology

Sample of interviews

For each country report, between 40 and 60 in-country interviews were conducted. The mix of interviewees aimed to include, on the one hand, the most important international donors (governmental and non-governmental, from a wide range of geographic origins), and on the other hand, a broad sample of local democracy stakeholders including human rights defenders, democracy activists, journalists, lawyers, political party representatives, women's rights activists, union leaders, and other stakeholders substantially engaged in the promotion of democratic values and practices in their country. Wherever possible, the sample of interviewees featured representatives from both urban and rural communities, and included a selection of stakeholders from a wide variety of sectors. While governmental stakeholders were included in many of the samples, the focus was on non-governmental actors. Both actual and potential recipients of external democracy aid (both financial and technical assistance) were interviewed.

Donors

The term 'donor' is here understood as including governmental and non-governmental external actors providing financial and/or technical assistance in the fields of democracy, human rights, governance, and related areas. Among all the donors active in the country, authors approached those governmental and non-governmental donors with the strongest presence in this sector, or which were referred to by recipients as particularly relevant actors in this regard. An exhaustive audit of all the donors active in this field in each country is not aspired to as it exceeds the scope of this study. While many donors were very open and collaborative in granting interviews and providing and confirming information, others did not reply to our request or were not available for an interview within the

timeframe of this study. While we sought to confirm all factual affirmations on donor activities with the donors in question, not all donors responded to our request.

Anonymity

External democracy assistance to local activists is a delicate matter in all the countries assessed within the framework of this project. It lies in the nature of external democracy assistance that local non-governmental recipients, especially when openly opposed to the ruling establishment, fear for their reputation and safety when providing information on external assistance received to any outlet that will make these remarks public. In a similar vein, many donor representatives critical of their own or other donors' programmes will fear personal consequences when these critical attitudes are made public on a personal basis. In the interest of gathering a maximum of useful information from our interviewees and safeguarding their privacy and, indeed, security, we have ensured the anonymity of all interviewees who requested this.

Interview methodology

In order to carry out field work, authors were provided with a detailed research template that specified 7 areas of focus:

1. A brief historical background and the state of democracy in the country;
2. A short overview of donor activities;
3. A general summary of local views on impact of democracy aid projects on the micro, meso and macro levels (including best practices and variations of the local and international understandings of the concept of 'democracy');
4. Local views on specific factors that have weakened the impact of democracy aid;

5. Local views on diplomatic back-up to aid programmes (including conditionality; diplomatic engagement; donor coordination; relevance, quality, quantity and implementation of programmes, etc);
6. An illustration of the above dynamics in one or two key sectors of support;
7. A conclusion outlining the main tendencies of local views on external democracy assistance.

Along these lines, semi-structured one-on-one interviews were carried out by the authors in the countries assessed between spring and autumn of 2009.

Key sectors of support

Transitions to democracy are highly complex political, economic and social processes. No study of this scope could aspire to fully do justice to them, or to external assistance to these processes. Aware of the limitations of our approach, we encouraged authors to let their general assessment of local views on external democracy support be followed by a closer, slightly more detailed assessment of the dynamics in one or two key sectors of support. These were chosen by the respective authors according to their estimated relevance (positively or negatively) in the current democracy assistance panorama. In none of the cases does the choice of the illustrative key sectors suggest that there may not be other sectors that are equally important.

Definition of 'democracy'

We do not work to a narrow or rigid definition of 'democracy support', but rather reflect donors', foundations' and recipients' own views of what counts and does not count as democracy assistance. The fact that this is contentious is part of the issues discussed in each report.

WORKING PAPERS

FRIDE

Democracy assistance needs to be re-energised. Donors and non-governmental democracy promoters have for some years now insisted that they are committed to designing democracy policies that are more demand-led. This working paper lays out the main concerns of civil society organisations in states on the receiving end of democracy support. It reports on their judgements of why democracy aid is not working as well as might be the case, and their views on how donors' strategies must adapt.

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