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The politics of 'participation' : civil society, the state and development assistance

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**THE POLITICS OF 'PARTICIPATION':
CIVIL SOCIETY, THE STATE AND
DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE**

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DISCUSSION PAPERS

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The Politics of Participation: Civil Society, the State and Development Assistance¹

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The starting point for this paper are some of the key texts relating to the question of promoting ‘pro-poor’ political participation and organisation, which were written or circulated within the British government’s Department for International Development (DFID) in preparation for a retreat organised to discuss the issue in October 2002. I incorporate into this some of the concerns I believe we are addressing within the Crisis States Programme. In this paper I demonstrate how paying attention to politics challenges some of the assumptions within programmes pursued by donors involved in the promotion of ‘good governance’ and economic reform.

The argument is structured around four issues: (1) the question of ‘participation’; (2) understanding ‘civil society’ and the state; (3) the role of what I think we can usefully call ‘political society’ and ‘political parties’; and (4) governance and economic reforms that may undermine political organisation.

Participation

Since at least the beginning of this decade, DFID has been asking what kind of participation may promote poverty reduction. I believe it is significant that DFID set the theme for its discussions as ‘pro-poor participation’, rather than ‘participation of the poor’. They did this, I would argue, because there has been a recognition that achieving poverty reduction may require supporting alliances and coalitions, and appealing to elites around a ‘pro-poor’ agenda. The work of Mick Moore and the Governance Group at the Institute for Development Studies (IDS) has been extremely influential in promoting this idea within DFID.²

In a paper about politics and poverty, Mick Moore and I underlined the rather well-known fact that poor people often participate in politics on bases that objectively may have little to do with their interest in poverty reduction, or that may be counterproductive to any goal of poverty reduction. Thus the poor may be mobilised to political action (from attending a meeting, to voting, protesting, rioting or even engaging in violence) on the basis of the language they speak, the ethnic identity they feel or can be persuaded to identify with, the geographic region in which they live, the religion in which they have grown up or have been persuaded to join, or loyalty to their patrons (sometimes involving forms of reciprocity and other times implicit coercion). In fact, it may be much more common for poor people to

¹ This paper was initially presented at a retreat of governance and social development workers from the Department for International Development (DFID), who were discussing issues related to the theme, ‘Promoting Pro-Poor Participation and Political Organisation’, October 2002. Comments are welcomed by the author (j.putzel@lse.ac.uk).

² This question was raised by Mick Moore and James Putzel, ‘Thinking Strategically about Poverty and Politics’, *Institute of Development Studies (IDS) Working Paper*, 101 (October 1999), a background paper for the *World Development Report 2000/01* (at <http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/publicat/wp/Wp101.pdf>). Theoretically, John Toye’s paper, ‘Nationalising the Anti-Poverty Agenda’ (*IDS Bulletin*, 30:2, pp.6-12) was very important in this regard demonstrating that key social reforms affecting the poor were initiated by political elites. See also Naomi Hossain and Mick Moore, ‘Arguing For The Poor: Elites and Poverty in Developing Countries’, *IDS Working Papers*, 148 (2002).

participate in these ways than around programmes or projects designed to directly improve their economic position in society.

Traditionally, Marxist analysts and activists attempted to explain this reality with appeals to the concept of ‘false consciousness’ based on the proposition that once enlightened people would act on the basis of their ‘class interests’, or in other words the interests defined by their position in relation to the production and distribution processes of the economy in which they live.³ This has always been one of the more far-fetched propositions of Marxist theorists and organisers inspired by these ideas, simply because we would have to conclude that most people, most of the time, are mired in false consciousness. Weber and Polanyi shed a rather different light on the problem, with Weber on the one hand illustrating the importance of ‘social status’ and Polanyi, on the other, the importance of ‘social protection’ as goals that excite and move people to action.⁴ By adopting this wider, and more believable view of human action, we can much more readily understand the varied bases on which the poor may be mobilised to ‘participate’ in political action. We can more readily understand how peasant communities were whipped up by political bosses and Islamic clerics to murder fellow peasants in the events leading up to the establishment of the Suharto regime in Indonesia in the mid-1960s, or how Rwandans or Bosnians came to engage in the murder of neighbours with whom they once lived peacefully, or how Israelis could be convinced to vote for a politician preaching hatred like Ariel Sharon.

Developing this perspective on ‘participation’ – that is, a ‘political perspective’ – helps us to avoid treating participation in a normative manner as purely a positive phenomenon. We can begin to treat the problem of participation analytically and ask on what basis do people participate, around what goals and to what ends.⁵ What, then, should donor attitudes be concerning the promotion of ‘participation’ and ‘participatory processes’ of decision-making and the like?

Participatory projects that require ordinary people to give of their time and limited resources are problematic as they tend to be hard to sustain. I have seen this in my own work where, in my little book, *Gaining Ground*, I documented a series of land occupations in the Philippines and the peasant communities’ initiatives in establishing cooperative production and management processes on the lands they occupied. Returning a couple of years later, I found that on some of the lands so occupied, the farmer organisations had decided to sell off the farms to real estate speculators at a substantial profit while on others, the cooperative farming areas on occupied lands lay idle while those allocated to family plots were well-tended and managed productively.⁶

One does not really need to go further than my community in north London to see how difficult it is to sustain people’s participation in local council meetings over time. Perhaps,

³ For an example of this, see Tom Brass, ‘Postscript: Populism, Peasants and Intellectuals, or What’s Left of the Future?’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 21: 3&4 (April-July 1994).

⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978, vol.1, pp.305-306. Karl Polanyi, *Great Transformation*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1957 [1944].

⁵ In *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1970, pp.32-35), Albert O.

Hirschman points out that in fact non-participation may not be a negative phenomenon per se, but a strength of a political system when he discusses the ‘reserves’ of a political system, where people can be mobilised when it really matters.

⁶ James Putzel with John Cunnington, *Gaining Ground* (London: War on Want, 1988). The Aquafil lands, visited in 1987, by 1989 were sold off by the peasant organisations with no public explanation; in the Negros sugar plantation first visited in 1984, by 1989 cooperative plots were moribund while family plots were well tended (Field visits, January to July 1989).

when people get particularly enraged or worried over a local problem they will attend meetings and engage in local organisational work, but when the problem is resolved, or if the problem drags on for a long period of time, people lose interest and motivation to participate. This is normal and it is why societies devise institutions and establish organisations – otherwise known as the state and the political parties that make up ‘political society’ – to manage (and debate and struggle over) the processes and undertakings related to their public goods and their collective interests.

What are the implications of this approach to ‘participation’? First, it is necessary to understand, in any given society, in what ways people are organised to participate, whether through civil society organisations, religious movements, or patronage relationships. Only rarely do poor communities organise themselves in some sort of spontaneous manner. It becomes necessary to understand how various groups incorporate the poor and other social sectors into political organisation. Second, it is likely that traditional forms of organisation may remain the most important for some time to come. The micro-interventions involved in different types of development work with the objective of improving the everyday lives of the poor need also to improve the ability of poor people to exercise voice in whatever political organisations reach them and through which they must act politically if they act politically at all.

Finally, an understanding that widespread ‘participation’ is generally not sustainable, and perhaps not even desirable, must focus attention on the quality of political society, political organisations and the state. If we understand that, strategically, public goods such as health, education, equal opportunity, poverty reduction and peace require public action, then we must be concerned with whether people are mobilised to participate in political society or whether their participation weakens or even undermines political society and ultimately the possibilities for a state that is able to achieve poverty reduction and development. When the state is moribund, already in a condition of collapse, or an instrument of extreme predation or extreme repression (for instance, Marcos in the Philippines, Suharto in Indonesia by the 1990s, or Mobutu in Zaire), then the question centres more on support that will strengthen political society towards the transformation of the state. The prescriptions for assistance must be specific in both time and place and can only be found through investigation and *political* analysis.

Civil society and the state

The DFID document on working with civil society is quite comprehensive, in its discussion of the meaning of civil society.⁷ While identifying the theory, the text also recognises that “actually existing civil societies” seldom conform to theory and require socially, culturally

⁷ ‘How to...work with civil society to support country strategy objectives’, draft, Department for International Development, circulated September 2002, posted on the web in November 2002 at http://www.dfid.gov.uk/foi/dc/21nov02_cs_how_to_work.pdf. Though not specifically referenced, they define civil society with a citation, ‘Civil society is the arena of associational life located between the state and the family or household, where society debates and negotiates matters of common concern and organises to regulate public affairs. It embraces highly institutionalised groups such as religious organisations, trades unions, business associations, co-operatives, local organisations such as community associations, farmers’ associations, local sports, cultural, business groups, international, national and local NGOs, credit societies, professional associations, and looser forms of association such as social movements, networks and virtual groups. These forms of association are distinct from the state and the market in that they are non-authoritative and non-profit - distributing. This is an acceptable starting point, though the inclusion of religious organisations may be problematic.

and historically specific analysis. Importantly, DFID recognises that it is not a domain free of division and power imbalances and says “[d]onors seeking to strengthen civil society have therefore to identify clearly their normative purposes, expectations and objectives”. Although DFID rejects the practice of some donors who think about civil society as equivalent to NGOs, they nevertheless acknowledge that, in practice, “[w]hen donor agencies operationalise the concept... there is a tendency to reduce civil society to NGOs”, and that this can “risk devising strategy and programmes which do not include important agents for change and which are therefore, in the longer term, less effective”.

The DFID treatment of defining characteristics of civil society is not without its problems,⁸ however its emphasis on the need for full-blown political analysis is welcomed. My concern is whether the prominence of politics is recognised clearly enough. DFID does recognise, in passing, that “[w]hile injecting resources into civil society can strengthen and empower the voice and influence of particular social groups and organisations, this may also contribute to the *weakening of the state*”. I am not certain that this insight about weakening the state is taken seriously enough. The DFID document states:

For such a space [civil society] to be effective there need to be laws guaranteeing the rights of citizens to associate, to organise and to speak freely, as well as a dynamic, independent media able to carry out its tasks without governmental interference or the threat of violence.

It is precisely this need for ‘laws’ and ‘security’ that underlines the intimate interdependence of civil society and the state. Only a relatively strong state can guarantee an environment for this associational space to thrive and grow. The role of media mentioned in the above citation raises an interesting set of questions in understanding the relationship between ‘civil society’, the state and the market. The ‘independent media’ is more often than not composed of market-based organisations, run on market profit principles. The professional ethics, which are required for media organisations to play their full role in securing basic freedoms, are secured in part by state regulations and laws and in part by the professional associations (among journalists and editors) and consumer groups that operate in civil society. This view means we must also break from the purely negative conceptions of state power that, for instance, mark DFID’s own statement about “government interference” above. Freedom of expression needs to be secured in the face of possibilities of *both* state and private coercion.

In a text that has been circulated within DFID, Tom Carothers makes an important point. He suggests that in most of the fragile formal democracies that emerged from prolonged periods of authoritarian rule in the developing world the central task remains state building.⁹ The very real legacy from pre-colonial and colonial periods remains in so many parts of the world incomplete processes of state formation. This means that three basic characteristics of state building - territorial control, security and the monopoly of the means of violence, and establishing the fiscal basis of public authority - are still very much on the agenda. As is driven home in our Crisis States Programme, in so many developing countries the central danger remains one of state *collapse*. Anything that undermines these three features of basic state formation will undermine democratic possibilities and, I would argue, any sort of sustainable ‘pro-poor’ outcomes.

⁸ The DFID text on civil society pays too brief attention to political parties; there is a confusion – shared with many writing on these issues – over whether political parties should be seen as part of the state or part of civil society, and the text uses the label ‘totalitarian’ in a problematic way.

⁹ Tom Carothers, ‘The End of the Transition Paradigm’ *Journal of Democracy* 13:1 (2002), pp.5-21.

Therefore, in programmes designed to ‘strengthen civil society’ one has to understand what the effects will be on the state, the real guarantor of civil society, democratic possibilities and pro-poor policies. It is important in this regard to be concerned with views that are current within the associations of civil society about the role of the state. Of course, donors may evaluate, or emergent civil society associations may well believe, that a given state is oppressive and predatory – the source of continued poverty and underdevelopment. In such situations, there has been overwhelming attention given to operations ‘outside’ of the state. This is understandable and defensible, but what concerns me is whether this sphere of action is undertaken from an ‘anti-state’ perspective or a perspective committed to ‘transforming the state’. This necessarily directs attention towards what we might best term ‘political society’: the way society organises itself in relation to the state.

‘Political society’ and political parties

In another paper that was circulated within DFID, Gwendolyn Bevis states that “it seems premature to dismiss political parties as dysfunctional in favour of civil society groups”.¹⁰ This seems to me to be the understatement of the decade, since the evidence from so many country situations points to the need to reinforce political parties as central to processes of democratisation. Carothers provides a good criticism of the democratic transition literature arguing that most developing countries find themselves not on a unilinear course of democratic development, but rather ‘stuck’ in one of two categories of what some have called ‘partial’ or weak democracies.¹¹ The first he calls, “feckless pluralism”, where the formal rules of democracy reign under situations of relative freedom, but where political elites from all parties are considered corrupt, the alteration of parties in power meaningless and the state remains persistently weak. The second group is labelled “dominant power politics”, where despite the formal rules of democratic competition, one organisation, group or individual remains dominant, with little alteration of power possible and little distinction made between the state and ruling party.¹²

Donors must recognise that most of the countries in which they operate fall into this ‘grey zone’ of democracy. Promoting ‘good governance’ without attention to this condition of political society is likely to lead to perverse outcomes. One of the first insights that emerges from this perspective is that in many countries, just as state building is still on the agenda, so too is the need to create viable political parties. In the Philippines since the restoration of its ‘feckless democracy’ in 1986, there have been a plethora of parties that come and go linked with personalities who enter the political arena.¹³ Shifting coalitions of clans and bosses characterise the political organisations that contest elections.¹⁴ A similar situation prevails in

¹⁰ Gwendolyn G. Bevis, ‘The AED Global Civil Society Partnership: Civil Society Groups and Parties Issue Paper’. Prepared for the Center for Democracy and Governance, Global Bureau United States Agency for International Development, 21 November 2001.

¹¹ Carothers (2002), p.9 citing evidence amassed by Larry Diamond (‘Is the Third Wave Over?’, *Journal of Democracy* 7 (July 1996), pp. 20:37), says most are in a “gray zone”: “Of the nearly 100 countries considered as ‘transitional’ in recent years, only a relatively small number - probably fewer than 20 – are clearly en route to becoming successful, well-functioning democracies or at least have made some democratic progress and still enjoy a positive dynamic of democratization”. See also Putzel, ‘The Survival of an Imperfect Democracy in the Philippines’, *Democratization*, Vol. 6 No. 1, (Spring 1999), pp.198-223. Hirschman also introduces the notion of ‘getting stuck’ in his 1995 re-evaluation of his early work, *Economic Strategy of Development (A propensity to Self-Subversion)*, Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995, p.89).

¹² Carothers (2002), pp.10-14.

¹³ Benedict Anderson, ‘Cacique Democracy in the Philippines: Origins and Dreams’, *New Left Review*, 169 (May-June 1988), pp.3-31.

¹⁴ See Putzel (1999).

Thailand.¹⁵ As the work of our Colombian colleagues in the Crisis States Programme demonstrates, even countries that may once have had definable political parties now find these in sharp decline.¹⁶

Immediately the question arises, can the international donor community, whether bilateral aid agencies or international NGOs, get involved in supporting political parties in the countries where they are operating? In one sense, this question is a non-starter as political organisations have long fielded ‘fronts’ of various sorts to tap into international donor resources.¹⁷ Of course, in many places, following the model of the Labour Party in Britain, a political party may be established through the action of membership-based civil society associations, like trade unions. But here the Labour Party experience is instructive since, from the moment the party was established, in order to contest elections it had to appeal to the public on a basis far beyond its origins in the labour movement.

If the international donor community wishes to continue to intervene in the field of ‘governance reform’ and ‘democratic promotion’ then it cannot avoid engaging with and potentially even promoting political parties. In fact, donors need to be concerned about how the civil society organisations with which they are working view this question. DFID, in discussing civil society and pro-poor outcomes, recognises the need for alliances – between grass-roots organisations, between the grassroots and elites – in order to promote policies and programmes that can achieve the kind of economic growth and distribution that will benefit poor people. For such alliances to become effective instruments of change they need to be formed into political organisations. In fact, it is political organisations that can appeal across class lines and ethnic and spatial divides. An alliance with pro-poor elites is necessarily a political alliance and probably based on some notion of ‘public good’ – for example, of how poverty reduction has externalities beyond the poor.

Two other thorny issues arise as soon as we begin to consider political parties in the governance agenda. First, is the issue of the number of political parties and indeed of non-governmental organisations. In Indonesia by the end of 2002, there were some two hundred political parties, 48 of which contested the elections. Drawing on the work of Albert Hirschman, the existence of so many political organisations and alternative NGO vehicles makes ‘exit’ a far too easy option and keeps political parties weak, or hardly worthy of the name.¹⁸ This has implications for the model of democracy and democratic competition that is promoted and supported. By supporting the endless proliferation of NGOs as a site for both employment and organisational opportunities of the middle classes, donors may well be contributing to weakening the potential for the consolidation of democracy.

The other thorny issue relates to the problem of secularism and democracy. Today, the US and British governments have been promoting *ad nauseum* ‘faith based’ initiatives. In many countries various forms of religious groups serve as the only refuge for those dissenting from

¹⁵ See Duncan McCargo, ‘Thailand’s political parties: Real, authentic and actual’, in Kevin Hewison (ed.), *Political Change in Thailand: Democracy and Participation*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp.114-131.

¹⁶ See, Maria Emma Wills with Maria Teresa Pinto, ‘Peru’s failed search for political stability (1968-2000)’, *Crisis States Programme Working Paper*, 30 (June 2003).

¹⁷ In the Philippines at the end of the 1980s, as foreign aid was pouring into the ‘NGO sector’, local politicians were conducting seminars on how best to tap into USAID resources (Field visits to five municipalities in Sorsogon province, May 1989). Left-wing parties – perhaps the only organisations in the Philippines worthy of the label ‘political party’ – have for years had strategies to put up organisations that could bring resources into their communities (see James Putzel, ‘Managing the “Main Force”’: The Communist Party and the Peasantry in the Philippines’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 22:4 (1995), pp.645-71.

¹⁸ Hirschman (1970), p.84.

monolithic authoritarian forms of governance. There is, however, a problem in mixing religion with politics, since, by its very nature, religions are exclusive and exclusionary. Obviously it is only possible to work with organisations that exist, but some attention should be paid to the notion of secularism as an inclusive basis for political organisation.¹⁹

Governance and economic reforms that undermine political organisation

As I mentioned above, in many parts of the developing world, the biggest threat to both achieving pro-poor outcomes and deepening political participation that might contribute to more democratic systems of governance remains the problem of state collapse. I would argue that many of the reforms of the past, whether designed to promote ‘good governance’ or economic development, may have reinforced tendencies towards collapse.

One of the central sources of donor interventions that may have weakened states in the past was the separation of economic analysis, diagnosis and prescription from political analysis and potential political impact. A starting hypothesis of our Crisis States Programme is that economic reforms, particularly related to macroeconomic management, may have led to the dismantling of institutional arrangements that manage conflict in society. When particular institutional arrangements (for instance, involving the allocation of rents, or protection of particular sectors in the economy) are evaluated only in terms of economic indicators, actions may be proposed that leave huge costs and benefits unmeasured.

The Carothers paper draws attention to the need to eliminate the separation between donor interventions in the economic and in the political spheres of a developing country. Economic performance needs to be assessed in the context of political realities. I am concerned in this final section with the political impact of some of the major economic and governance reforms that donors have proposed with the intention of promoting good governance and international stability over the past few decades. I take up four issues in this regard: (1) programmes to deliver public services through private means; (2) processes of producing poverty reduction strategy papers (PRSPs); (3) anti-corruption campaigns; and (4) donor intervention in international affairs and security.

Privatisation of public goods and public service delivery

In the face of poor or non-existent government protection/promotion of public goods or provision of public services, encompassing health, education, transport, and more controversially, fiscal strength and security, donors have moved decidedly towards a philosophy of private delivery.²⁰ This is a phenomenon prevalent in both developed and developing countries, though one might argue that the room for manoeuvre in many developing countries, particularly those subject to intense crises or emerging from state collapse, has been much more constrained.

¹⁹ Of course, the UK is no shining example here, with the melding of Church and State and, while the idea of the separation of Church and State was foundational in the US constitution, it has nevertheless developed a particularly Christian understanding of the ‘one nation under God’ mentioned in the Pledge of Allegiance so commonly uttered by its citizens and soldiers.

²⁰ There is a sense in which these are both public goods and public services. Hirschman (1970), p.101, defines public goods as “goods which are consumed by all those who are members of a given community, country, or geographical area in such a manner that consumption or use by one member does not detract from consumption or use by another”.

There is a wide debate about the relative necessity and impact of the private delivery of public services and the impact this has on the protection of public goods. I am concerned here with how the trend toward private delivery may have an unanticipated impact on politics, political organisation and the possibilities of the promotion of more healthy democratic forms. The condition of public goods like those mentioned above is vital to the poor and to prospects for poverty reduction. In fact, if we had no concern about poverty reduction, we might be able to ignore the condition of many public goods.

It is possible to argue that governance is in fact all about looking after and developing public goods. In a sense, this is what the state exists to do and in many countries this defines the realm and object of political organising. While a weak state may only be able to protect public goods through the organisation of private delivery of public services, history instructs us that there are important limitations to the extent to which private organisations can fulfil these needs. Thus, even if a state must rely temporarily on private mechanisms to tend to the condition of health, education, transport, fiscal strength and security, from a strategic point of view these should prepare the way for a state role in the future.

Albert Hirschman, perhaps more articulately than anyone else, has pointed to the fundamental problem in the private provision of services that both affect and effect the condition of public goods. When incentives are developed for individuals to opt out of public provision of health or education, this inevitably leads the most well-off and the most articulate in society to choose private provision. By opening the way for ‘exit’, this leads to a great weakening of the possibilities for ‘voice’. It is those who might be most likely to fight for better provision of a public service, most aware of the condition of a public good, and most capable of altering the state’s organisation, who are most likely to exit. As Hirschman notes, “the possibility for exit” tends “to atrophy the development of the art of voice” – and what is the art of voice, but the art of politics.²¹

The impact of privatisation of services on the political system is seldom assessed or analysed. By privatising, or settling for private provision, donors and governments weaken the state – in some senses they contribute to ‘delegitimising’ the state. This weakens the realm and possibilities for political organisation as well. It contributes to the ‘atrophy’, or perhaps simply the suppression, of ‘the art of voice’.

Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers

A recent vogue in donor circles has been the articulation and implementation of ‘poverty reduction strategy papers’ (PRSPs), designed to involve broad constituencies in developing and transition countries in processes of policy-making. There are a number of very positive attributes of the PRSPs, not least of which is that politics are thought about together with economics and concerns with poverty are put at the top of the agenda. However, I have two concerns with the politics of PRSPs, which I believe have not been accorded great attention in the donor community.

The first is linked with my discussion above about participation. The notion that PRSPs will involve poor people, train them and allow them to participate in political processes seems to me to be a particularly unsustainable formula for political participation in the medium to long-term. We have nothing like PRSPs in our own developed societies and political systems. What makes anyone think that such forms of participation can be sustained in developing

²¹ Hirschman (1970), p.43.

countries? In the medium to long term it is professional politicians who must engage over time with these matters. In even weak democracies they will be measured at election time by the extent to which they are perceived to have fulfilled their promises. I think there is a legitimate concern about whether the PRSPs are geared to strengthening debates about poverty *within* existing political systems, or whether they in fact bypass and therefore weaken political systems. They may be undermining debate in political systems by conducting processes outside of normal channels of governance and representation. Donors have to think about how both inputs to, and the articulation of, poverty reduction strategies are being debated *within* government structures and among political organisations that compete for political power.

Anti-politics – anti-corruption

The Bevis paper on civil society and parties, mentioned above, suggests that the open-ended criticism of all political parties by civil society groups is doing damage to the legitimacy of the political realm. Donor agencies and international agencies, including organisations like Transparency International, are conducting unrelenting campaigns against corruption in developing countries. It may well be that an unintended consequence of these campaigns is to contribute to delegitimising the political sphere altogether. As our Colombian collaborators on the Crisis States Programme have begun to point out in their work, the new role of media in politics tends to exacerbate these effects.²²

Repeated campaigns against corruption in the Philippines have led to popular disillusionment with all politicians and political organisations. As this becomes aggravated, it creates much greater room for those who pursue their political objectives outside of established institutions and organisations, through the means of violence and even terror. If campaigns against corruption are to strengthen, rather than weaken, the realm of politics, they need to be well-targeted and limited in their scope and attention must be paid to promoting the positive dimensions of politics and political organising.

International stance of donors

If donors want to contribute to the promotion of ‘democratic politics’ then they must also be concerned with their own ‘moral ground’ and with practices at home. It takes years for an organisation like DFID, for instance, after the UK’s own history of colonialism and empire, to build up relationships of trust and respect among communities in developing countries. When donor governments have double-standards in their dealings with governments around the world – holding Iraq to one standard while holding Turkey or Israel to another (in terms of implementation of UN resolutions or treatment of minorities within their jurisdictions) then relations of trust can break down very quickly and take years to re-establish.

If a donor community like the United States experiences such anomalies as occurred in the US presidential elections in 2000, it places the country in a much weaker position to advocate standards of probity in elections in developing countries. The behaviour of donors on the world scene is absolutely decisive in determining the amount of influence they may have in their interventions in any particular developing country setting.

²² See Wills and Pinto (2003).

Conclusion

Discussions about promoting participation must start from, and engage with, the realities of how and where ordinary and poor people actually are organised. Most people are likely to be mobilised through traditional forms of political organisation and any interventions to promote participation should be concerned with improving the ability of people to exercise voice in those established organisations. Since widespread participation is difficult to sustain, even if it were desirable, attention must be placed on institutionalised forms of political participation and improving the capacity of the state to meet the needs of the poor.

In considering support for 'civil society associations', donor agencies need to be concerned with the political impact of that support and its effect on the quality of the state. The state remains the crucial site to guarantee associational space. In many parts of the developing world, state formation is still on the agenda and state collapse remains the greatest danger to the promotion of both pro-poor policy outcomes and the consolidation of more democratic forms of governance.

Given the condition of 'stalled democratisation', donors need to look much more carefully at the development of 'political society' and consider whether their programmes contribute to, or detract from, the establishment of the political parties needed to deepen democracy. Patterns of support for civil society associations may contribute to the development of programmatic political parties or may, either by ideology or the provision of mechanisms of exit, weaken the possibility of the emergence of effective parties.

In designing governance and economic reforms, close attention needs to be paid to their political impact. The provision of public services through private means may lead to the deterioration of public goods or prevent future enhancement of public goods while simultaneously weakening the state and constricting the development of political society and democratic politics. Poverty reduction strategy processes, if conducted outside formal political institutions and organisations, may also undermine future democratic possibilities. Well-intentioned campaigns against corruption, especially with the advancement of the media's role in politics, may contribute to the delegitimation of political organisations and the public realm. Donors, acting inconsistently on the international stage, may undermine their own influence within developing country communities.

It is important to work toward a situation where poor people find the realm of politics and political organisations that work within the state, or to positively transform the state, as legitimate. If not, support directed towards the 'grass-roots' will provide only ephemeral improvements and will weaken the long-term possibilities for positive political organisation and long-term poverty reduction.

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Discussion Papers in Series

- DP1 James Putzel, 'The Politics of 'Participation': Civil Society, the State and Development Assistance' (January 2004)
- DP2 James Putzel, 'The 'new' imperialism and possibilities of co-existence' (January 2004)
- DP3 Jean-Paul Faguet, 'Democracy in the Desert: Civil Society, Nation Building and Empire' (January 2004)

These can be downloaded from the Crisis States website (www.crisisstates.com), where an up-to-date list of all our publications and events can be found.

The aim of the Crisis States Programme (CSP) at DESTIN's Development Research Centre is to provide new understanding of the causes of crisis and breakdown in the developing world and the processes of avoiding or overcoming them. We want to know why some political systems and communities, in what can be called the "fragile states" found in many of the poor and middle income countries, have broken down even to the point of violent conflict while others have not. Our work asks whether processes of globalisation have precipitated or helped to avoid crisis and social breakdown.

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Research Objectives

- 1 We will assess how constellations of power at local, national and global levels drive processes of institutional change, collapse and reconstruction and in doing so will challenge simplistic paradigms about the beneficial effects of economic and political liberalisation.
- 2 We will examine the effects of international interventions promoting democratic reform, human rights and market competition on the 'conflict management capacity' and production and distributional systems of existing polities.
- 3 We will analyse how communities have responded to crisis, and the incentives and moral frameworks that have led either toward violent or non-violent outcomes.
- 4 We will examine what kinds of formal and informal institutional arrangements poor communities have constructed to deal with economic survival and local order.



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