

# Africa after the Africa Commission: What Priorities for the German G8?



## Working Group Report

### Civic engagement and accountability

#### Adrian Wells

Adrian Wells began his presentation by explaining that, with regard to ownership and accountability around aid, the G8 Action Plan from 2005 recognises the need to involve civil society in all aspects of the NEPAD process, but the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness is largely silent on the 'demand-side' pressure for governance reform through civic engagement. Accountability to citizens is arguably essential to national ownership and mutual accountability around aid relationships. As such, to what extent can donors be expected to support civic engagement with the state?

Adrian explained that civil society could be regarded as agents of accountability as rights-based approaches to development have encouraged civil society to play a much more active role in political advocacy. It can also act as a counterweight to both the state and to how donors support this agenda.

In terms of strengthening support to civic engagement, this is not always forthcoming, and there is criticism that donor-government dialogue around PBRs for example, is closing down space for civic engagement compared to the broad participation in PRSPs. The Africa Commission report and DFID's 2006 White Paper however reinforce it, highlighting the role that citizens and civil society can play in helping to keep the state honest.

There is a lack of donor vision with regard to strengthening civic engagement. Donors are not as well coordinated in supporting civil society as they are in supporting developing country governments and donor support to voice and accountability in large part skills up civil society for the advocacy, or the capacity of the state to respond. It is less work for donors to broker and facilitate the interface between citizens and the state and there is uncertainty over the degree to which donors should engage in endogenous political processes.

Support to civic engagement is 'politics'. The 2006 White Paper is clear about the importance of politics, as the often informal processes by which states, leaders and citizens relate to each other to make change happen (politics as citizen action). A focus on the "interaction of interest groups" is potentially a radical departure from traditional governance reform.

There are many political unknowns for donors working to strengthen civic engagement. The DFID White Paper stops short of examining the implications of a focus on politics. Can we make the same assumptions about citizen voice and accountability in "neo-patrimonial" and fragile-state contexts? Factors to consider in these contexts include:

- Rules defining citizenship may be poorly defined/enforced
- Absence of formal channels
- Engaging with the "missing middle"

- The most marginal (or indeed influential) actors may operate outside the constitution
- Is "constituency" a more valid entry point than "citizenship"?

Donors are not well equipped to work politically. It is a difficult balancing act between the need to safeguard relations with government on the one hand and not to undermine CSO advocacy on the other. Political risk encourages donors to work at "arms' length" from civil society, e.g. through intermediary NGOs and local foundations; may lack the capacity to mediate in political conflicts

Politics and harmonisation do not necessarily sit comfortably together. There is increasing harmonisation of donor support to civil society – pooled funding, joint programmatic frameworks, etc, however not all donors are willing to work with social movements or other potentially politicised actors and not all donors are sufficiently flexible in their funding arrangements to minimise transaction costs for civil society partners, which potentially acts to exclude more marginal citizens groups, and those with minimal administrative capacity.

Regarding next steps, Adrian suggested two possible ways forward:

1. Enhancing the rules of the game for civic engagement (e.g. support to civic education, conflict resolution and political party development). But in this case, expectations should be lowered because accountability emerges gradually.
2. Backing specific interest groups to achieve particular policy outcomes. This raises questions over the role of donors as legitimate players in endogenous political processes.

Adrian asserted that if donors are to work politically with civil society, they must:

- Understand better what 'voice' constitutes in fragile-state, neo-patrimonial settings; how it is exercised; and how to work with it.
- Relax administrative rules to allow a more diverse set of influential actors to access funding and facilitation, especially under multi-donor mechanisms.
- Where the current trend is to work through an intermediary, be prepared to invest diplomatic weight in directly facilitating civic engagement with the state.

Offering some discussion points, in conclusion Adrian asked:

- Are our assumptions about citizenship and accountability adequate?
- Who in African civil society should donors be working more with?
- Politics as civic action v. politics as political partying.
- Support to "rules of the game" v. backing of interest groups; what is the legitimate role of donors?
- What changes in the aid architecture are needed to support civic engagement?

## Discussion

Points and questions raised during the discussion included:

- On government v. citizens – civil society means citizens organising themselves to demand services, but what about trades unions, private companies, associations and non-government-delivery citizen-related groups? Who should be involved and what should their responsibilities be? Adrian replied that the involvement of other groups such as these would indicate a move beyond elite NGOs, but questioned who makes the choices about who to speak to and how legitimate they are?
- On external solutions to African problems - 38% of people in the UK do not vote and Africa does not have homogenous problems. A Western-centric approach/solution may not therefore be appropriate. There are many external influences acting on African citizens already, so maybe there is a need to look more holistically at the problem and involve the diaspora, etc.

- On donors engaging with politics - donors are politically engaged whether they like it or not. Resources are by their very nature a political entity, however it would not be desirable to have donors determining the politics of civil society.
- On concepts and context - many concepts were referred to in the presentation, accountability, citizenship, civic engagement, etc. These could all be analysed separately, however context is also very important. Civil society in Africa encompasses more than just NGOs. There are also many different forms of civic engagement, many of which are invisible to us as outsiders. It would be sensible to find out more about such existing processes first and build on what is already there. If existing processes need to be strengthened, then an appropriate rather than generic solution could be applied.
- On the role of the media – radio and other forms of broadcasting are very powerful tools which can contribute to improved governance and democracy. Media development is also very important in order to give other, otherwise marginalised groups a voice.
- On donor accountability and transparency - most social movements of the last 20 years have depended on donor funding (womens' groups, HIV groups, etc) but it is important to also consider the terms upon which the resources are provided. Where does the accountability lie? There is a need for increased accountability and transparency of donor processes. Current thinking is for civil society to hold governments to account for the money they are given by donors but small NGOs in Africa don't have the capacity to hold donors to account as well as their own governments. It would help to bring governments and donors into one forum to initiate policy dialogue, such as that which is currently happening on general budget support. Donors like DFID should also be held to account by the tax payers whose money they spend.
- On the transparency of aid, it is impossible to find information about aid flows from the UK and therefore impossible to track them. There is no certainty on figures for aid given to British NGOs either. If this isn't possible here in the UK, how can we expect to do it in Africa?
- On donors' roles in shaping civil society – most small NGOs are being excluded due to a lack of donor flexibility. Donor processes also privilege external accountability over domestic accountability.

### **Recommendations to the G8**

- Civic engagement must begin with mutual accountability around aid flows and the impacts of aid architecture on African civil society. There is a critical need for access to information, where donor processes privilege external over domestic accountability.
- The current aid architecture favours elite groups over civil society at the grass roots and with broad membership. There is a need to fund multi-stakeholder processes through diverse experimental portfolios of civil society partners. It is questionable whether changes in the aid architecture can support this.
- Much more work is needed on the development of channels and democratic spaces, e.g. the media, private-sector and diaspora associations, the justice sector and (in particular) parliaments and political party development.
- There is a risk of excessive expectations of civil society as agents of accountability and the ability to scale this up, bordering on social engineering. Accountability emerges slowly and unevenly, requiring a long-term strategic perspective. This in turn requires systems to track changes in the political environment and the development of democratic spaces.
- Donors need to be honest about their roles as political actors and about their responsibilities, not to simply pass political risk on to civil society which may be very vulnerable in some contexts.