

SUMMARY PAPER ON DEMOCRATIC ASSISTANCE

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Examining the causal relation between political aid (only later to be refined and known as democratic assistance) and the transition to democracy in Africa is a good starting point in this debate. It conveniently sets off the debate and systemically draws out other arguments on the issue of foreign assistance, democratization and elections.

It is argued that neither democratic/political aid nor any other form of aid prompted the region's early processes of democratisation or that there was indeed any correlation between the two. Traces of the process of political liberalization were found in African politics before 1990. In *Sub Saharan Democratic Transition as Political Crisis*, Patrick Quentin – argues that during the first three decades of post independence (1960-1990) most African states experimented with variations between authoritarian rule and political liberalisation. The liberalisation to which he refers, basically consisted of electoral competition within a one party political system. In fact, reports Goran Hyden, Tanzania conducted its first systematic election in 1965, which had some democratic elements¹.

Africa's venture into democracy may not have been the design of the west. It is hardly a secret, however that the western form of democracy – multiparty democracy (and its various connotations), later introduced in Africa was due mostly to external pressures and influence. The origins of such pressure are found in the role of international actors: the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and Western donors. By the late 1980s overt political interventions surfaced, mostly enforced by the Bretton Woods institutions with the aid of strict economic sanctions and political conditionality used to force countries to reform politically. The principal focus of this pressure for political liberalisation was on creating competent political structures and legitimate regimes, wholly supportive of the goals of adjustment. Consequently by the early 1990s foreign aid conditionality, of which structural adjustments were original versions, emerged as the most effective instigator for democracy in the region. The idea was to use the fulfillment of stipulated political obligations as a prerequisite for obtaining economic aid, debt relief and a selection of other types of foreign aid². Countries like Malawi and Kenya received the full brunt of this post Cold War political policy. They both represent clear cases of how donors multilaterally and somewhat successfully rallied to freeze foreign aid in order to compel authoritarian regimes to democratise.

It was during this period that democratic assistance and foreign aid at large became refined, refocused and highly conditional. And it was then that electoral democracy emerged as a new phenomenon in most SADC countries, and the first wave of African

¹ Goran Hyden, 'Top Down Democratization in Tanzania', *Journal of Democracy*, October 1999.

² Philippe C. Schmitter, 'The Influence of the International Context upon the Choice of National Institutions and Policies in Neo-Democracies'. in Laurence Whitehead, ed, *The International Dimensions of Democratization: Europe and the Americas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, pp 26-74.

elections began to sweep the continent. A joint communiqué issued by the Nordic Ministers of Development Cooperation in 1990, for example, declared democracy along with human rights to be major objectives of its aid programme. Since 1990, the international community, whether on a bilateral or multilateral basis, has provided impressive assistance to electoral processes in SADC. Such specific democratic assistance provided for electoral democracy has played a significant role in the development of Africa's democracy; a more decisive and cohesive one than that of other forms of foreign aid. It is this unequivocal role that is the focus of this brief.

Democratic assistance, to begin with, has been quite helpful in assisting post conflict countries in their transitional elections. The example of Mozambique is the most telling. Shepard Forman and Stewart Patrick point to the fact that diplomatic support and assistance also underpinned the outcome of the peace process, as external actors facilitated the first multiparty elections³. The 1992 Rome Conference Peace Implementation Programme for Mozambique pledged US \$76.9 million for the electoral process. There is no denying that in many post conflict countries, donor assistance has been of great importance in ensuring the sustainability of the transition, just as it has been in ensuring the transition from an electoral competition within a party to a multiparty election.

However, it is very difficult to measure, with accuracy, the real impact of electoral assistance provided by the international community on the outcomes of transition elections. In any case, the issue of whether democratic assistance has consolidated democracy in the region only becomes relevant after the second round of elections. These elections come with more experience, better understanding of its intricacies and specific foreign interventions that impacted democracy in the region more significantly – demonstrating the need for countries to “pause, regroup and consolidate one's gains”⁴. In other words, the issue of democratic consolidation only becomes viable once democratic transition in the region is in full force, and this was assumed to have happened by the second round of regional elections. By 1999 at least 24 elections had been held in the region, by all the SADC countries with the exception of Swaziland and the Democratic Republic of Congo.

Democratic assistance on offer towards the end of the 1990s took various forms: electoral assistance (organization and conduct of elections, independent election management bodies, supervision of elections, verification of elections) and technical assistance (voter registration, voter education, constitutional and legal matters, logistics and training of electoral officials, political parties and local observers/monitors). To ensure the institutionalisation of these practices, donors have been giving substantial financial support to many SADC countries. The Nordic countries, for example, have

³ Nicole Ball & Sam Barnes; “Mozambique”, In Shepard Forman and Stewart Patrick, *Good Intentions: Pledges for Post conflict Recovery*, USA: Center on International Cooperation Studies in Multilateralism, 2000, p 170.

⁴ Samuel P. Huntington, ‘Democracy for the Long Haul’, *Journal of Democracy*, vol 7, April 1996, p 9.

been particularly generous with a strong record in this area. In 2001, their contribution to many countries in Southern Africa amounted to about US \$2 billion⁵.

Positives versus Negatives of Democratic Assistance on Electoral Democracy

Foreign aid, it would seem, has helped to lay the appropriate foundations, put into place the right electoral institutions, rebuild those that had fallen into disuse, and sustained the existence of those in operation. A closer examination of some of these institutions will show how significant a role democratic assistance has played in strengthening electoral democracy.

One of the most strategic democracy support practices applied by most donors has been that of political party support. While donors in general do not fund political parties, as it is prohibited by electoral acts of most recipient countries, they do offer assistance in terms of training, seminars and conferences. Such assistance is most welcome, as many opposition political parties in SADC often find themselves competing in an unlevelled playing field due to inadequate funding, insufficient training for party members and party agents, and unfair access to state resources. Obviously, this lack of resources for parties inhibits democratic development. It is generally accepted that well resourced and organised political parties are more likely to succeed in spreading their message to the voters and are better positioned to influence the rules of the electoral process to their advantage.

Democracy assistance received by pro-democracy Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in the region has also had some positive impact on the formations of democracy. Donors have funded NGOs sometimes without reservation, in comparison with political parties. Since they are perceived to be non-partisan organisations, well positioned to watch over the electoral process, and have the capacity to critically monitor the government; donors have readily funded and assisted them. Between 1991 and 1997, the United States devoted about one third of its democracy assistance worldwide to civil society, averaging about \$15 million a year.⁶

In the beginning, it was mostly religious groups, teachers and trade unions that played significant roles in guiding the process of political opening. Today's democracy in Africa, however, has generally been advanced by new independent and non partisan national and regional NGOs. In the case of Zimbabwe, for instance, early civil organisations that spearheaded resistance against the government included the Zimbabwe Council of Churches (ZCC) and the Zimbabwe Congress of Trade Unions (ZCTU), more recently new groups such as the Southern African Human Rights Trust (SAHRIT) and the

⁵ Elling N Tjonneland: *Supporting Democracy in Africa: What are aid donors doing?* Global Dialogue, Foundation for Global Dialogue, Vol 6, No1, 2001, P4

⁶ Source: democracy assistance figures for FY 1995-98 provided by the Bureau for Democracy and Governance of USAID, cited in Marina Ottaway and Theresa Chung, 'Debating Democracy Assistance Toward a New Paradigm', *Journal of Democracy*, vol 10, no 5, 1999.

Zimbabwe Electoral Support Network (ZESN) have joined the resistance. The latter has had influential support from donors, and with it has managed to impressively campaign against some of the more flagrant electoral malpractices of the 2002 presidential elections.

It seems the attention of this assistance to pro-democracy NGOs is mostly in the area of election monitoring. Increasingly, it is becoming clear that domestic monitors of elections are crucial in the process of consolidating democracy in Southern Africa. The Zimbabwe elections have demonstrated that domestic monitors do not just supplement efforts of international actors/observers, they can also contribute to the invention and consolidation of genuine democratic and pluralist political systems threatened by disputes over election outcomes. Domestic observers have become even more salient, recently due to the concerns recipient countries have raised about international observers. International observers too, however have their purpose. It is said that they do more than watch, and note take on the electoral processes they observe. Their presence during elections and "independent" assessments they produce of these elections can generate the necessary political momentum for governments to implement "fair" electoral practices.

The above account however, is just one side of the story. Democratic assistance has had negative impacts as well, most notably the electoral tensions that have arisen between donors and some recipient countries. Several governments in the region have become extremely critical of some donors' attempts to assume greater say in the management of their elections. Similarly donors' eagerness to support opposition parties with no appropriate democratic credentials has given incumbent governments reason to be wary. The argument can even be extended to say that in countries with highly frozen and polarized political climates, democratic support of this kind can have further polarising tendencies in these countries. The current political impasse in Zimbabwe serves as a strong illustration of this problem. Negotiations and perhaps resolutions to bridge the differences between the Movement for Democratic Change (MDC) and the ruling ZANU- PF have gone nowhere, the political and economic situation is deteriorating, and foreign policy directed to isolate ZANU-PF is making such resolution even less likely.

There are many more arguments that demonstrate why democratic assistance to political parties needs to be received with more caution. Specifically, analysts argue that money given directly to the party core can weaken internal democracy in the parties. The logic behind this is that party leadership will seek to buy services and influence party policies through payments. Equally such assistance can create distance between the party and the electorate, as the party will be less inclined to represent the view of the citizens and to challenge the government from its comfortable financial position⁷. Foreign

⁷ Harald Mathiesen and Lars Svasand, 'Funding Political Parties in Emerging African Democracies: What Role for Norway?' *Chr, Michelsen Institute Report (CMI series) – Development Studies and Human Rights*, 2002, p 6.

funding has also been accused of contributing to the fragmentation of party systems. Lesotho is evidence of this, where numerous political parties competed in the 2002 elections with very little basis in the electorate but were lured into the race by the readily available international funds⁸.

More difficult to assess, but deserving some mention is the impact democratic assistance has had on democratisation through pro-democracy NGOs. Most assistance to NGOs is geared towards attaining short term results rather building capacity to enhance policy influence. It is doubtful therefore that NGOs have had any real influence on government policies over the years. Moreover, few of these have the potential to be sustainable in the absence of donor support, and it is clear that they will not have a lasting impact on democratisation if they are not sustainable.

The cost of democracy and the sustainability of democratic assistance at large is a subject that is only now beginning to receive some attention. More affordable models are needed, and not the adopted modern processes and institutions that are driving up the cost of formal democracy and not necessarily deepening its content⁹. These and many more are issues that need to be examined when assessing the impact of democratic assistance on electoral democracy in SADC.

⁸ Lesotho political parties depend mainly on membership subscription for their survival. Over and above subscriptions, parties get unrestricted financial support from outside sources.

⁹ Marina Ottaway and Theresa Chung, Debating democracy assistance – toward a new paradigm, *Journal of Democracy*, 1999.