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Donors as political actors: fighting the Thirty Years War in Bolivia

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Summary

Based on the author's own experience as head of a bilateral agency country office, the paper tells a story about how the donor community became engaged in a conflict about monitoring the Poverty Reduction Strategy. This experience is used to explore donors' involvement in political processes within aid-recipient countries. Their understanding of the national context and the quality of the relations that donor staff establish in the recipient country only partially explain the nature of their involvement. Because they are sustained over time and are not contingent on the country where a staff member happens to be working for a few years there are two other sets of non local relationships that may be more influential. These are membership of the global development cooperation community, of which the country specific donor community is a sub-set, and the relationships back home to the staff member's own country's history, institutions, values and practices. The interpretation of these sets of relations, and the action resulting from this, are mediated by an individual's own personal history and life experiences. Consciously situating oneself with respect to personal and institutional values and relationships would allow individual staff members in donor agencies to reflect upon and explore taken for granted assumptions about the way the world appears to them. It would help them work more comfortably and sensitively with the ambiguity, paradox and unanticipated outcomes that they encounter on a daily basis in their goal of reducing world poverty. The paper argues that greater reflexivity would help donor staff and their organisations become more skilled at supporting aid recipients in their efforts.

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Preface

This working paper was written soon after I stopped working for UK Department for International Development (DFID) and came to take up a Fellowship in the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) at Sussex University. It draws on case material collected as an observing participant while I was working for DFID in Bolivia as head of its country office between March 2000 and June 2002. While I am very grateful to DFID for the opportunity given to me to work in Bolivia, the views expressed in this working paper are entirely my own and in no way reflect DFID official policy.

Karen Brock, Andrea Cornwall, Margaret Kenna, Rosemary McGee, Mark Robinson and Jock Stirrat kindly commented on earlier drafts of this paper. Jethro Pettit, with Beth Harrison, edited the paper and introduced me to the IDS house style for which I am grateful. I am also very grateful to friends and colleagues in Bolivia with whom I worked, drank and argued during the course of this and other stories. This is my version of one story. Others would tell it differently and I hope they will.

I tell the story primarily as a stimulus to greater donor reflexivity: what are the taken for granted assumptions under which we are operating and how are we perceived and managed by those whom we encounter in the local political arena? I believe that in answering these questions there may be insights that can help donor organisations make better choices in the here and now of messy day to day politics. They are "better" choices because they are ones that can contribute, in Sen's terms, to the process of expanding the real freedoms of poor people in poor countries.

1 Introduction

The idea for this paper originated in a conversation in a bar in La Paz. At the time, I was head of the DFID Bolivia office and I was discussing with a colleague from another European bilateral aid mission how we could achieve consensus within the "donor community" concerning the conflict between two parts of Bolivian civil society in relation to the monitoring of the country's donor-inspired Poverty Reduction Strategy. He mentioned in this context the disagreement between him and a third European colleague whom he accused of 'fighting the Thirty Years War all over again in Bolivia'.

My understanding of the Thirty Years War is that it was fought in the first half of the seventeenth century between Protestant and Catholic countries in northern and central Europe. In the centuries that followed this last great conflict in northern Europe that was expressed in terms of religious differences, Catholic countries experienced a further political struggle concerning the power and legitimacy of the Church to be involved in state affairs. Protestants tended to sympathise with the anti-clerical movement in Catholic countries. They viewed such a movement as liberal and secular reflecting the development of similar liberal and democratic processes in their own countries. They also liked the anti-clericals because many Protestants continued to view with deep suspicion any apparent political action by Rome. My grandfather was such a secular liberal of the Protestant tradition.[1] I and my two colleagues rarely if ever considered how the prejudices of our ancestors might be affecting the decisions we were making as rational civil servants at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The comment about the Thirty Years War, spoken half in jest, suddenly revealed the complex depths of donors' political behaviour.

The paper is structured as follows. In this introductory section I briefly consider why donors are interested in politics, whether that interest can incorporate a capacity for reflexity and my own situation in writing this paper. In the first main section I propose a conceptual framework for understanding donors as a community and in relation to recipients. In the following section I then use this framework to tell the story of how donors in Bolivia became involved in a complex local power struggle over institution building for greater state accountability to poor people. Alternative titles for this paper were 'When fools rush in . . .' or 'The long arm of history'. In the third and final section, I summarise the lessons I learnt from this experience, and identify some practical steps for helping donors be better at politics for meeting their poverty reduction objectives. Some readers may wish to start with the story (page 19 onwards) and go afterwards to the conceptual section.

Donors have become interested in politics in recent years for a number of reasons. Some (primarily northern European official bilateral agencies and UN agencies) have begun to use human rights as a framework for their engagement in poor countries. In some cases, for example in DFID, the antecedents to

[1] When he learnt that I was intending to marry a divorced Belgian he remarked that he was not worried about the previous marriage as at least it showed that my intended husband was not a practising Catholic.

rights-based approaches lie in *participatory development* but DFID found it easier to maintain a technical stance with the latter than to engage in the question of rights. Because participation could be seen as an instrument rather than a right, it was rare for donors' definitions to highlight issues of power, conflict and contestation (Cornwall 2000). Today, when using the language of rights, it is harder to avoid politics. As noted in the DFID strategy paper on human rights, a struggle to realise human rights is essentially political.[2]

Others in the donor community are approaching politics from the angle of modernisation of the state, support to reform processes and *good governance*. How should donors behave in a 'difficult partnership' with 'poor performers', that is those with 'severe governance problems'? (DAC 2001). This growing interest in the political aspects of governance is leading to a growing body of donor policy papers and supporting academic research (Moore and Putzel 1999; Hossain and Moore 2001; Johnson and Start 2001; Tendler 1998).

Yet, whether they are approaching politics from the human rights or the governance angle, by and large donors have not recognised themselves as an integral part of the political scene (Moore and Putzel 2000). They have not yet problematised their own political presence or practice. Even those working within the international human rights framework have rarely scrutinised their own behaviour in using that framework as the justification for their action.

1.1 Can donors become more reflexive?

Chambers defines reflexivity as 'self-critical epistemological awareness, entailing critical reflection on the part one plays, and one's relationships and interactions play, in the formation, framing and representation of knowledge'(Chambers 2002). From a practitioner's perspective I would add to this 'the formation, framing and representation of knowledge and *action*'.

Arguably, by their nature, bureaucratic organisations find it difficult to learn through reflection (Morgan 1986). The more uncertain their environment the more difficult they may find it and thus they cannot do what they most need. In the last decade or so the donor community has scaled up from fairly modest and limited projects to taking on the burden of Atlas. Donors have adopted an enormously ambitious goal, no less than the eradication of world poverty, with all the risks, conflicts and ambiguities associated with such an agenda. Donor bureaucracies work in a highly uncertain environment. Operating at the global level, in a world of paradox and surprise, the pressure grows to pass themselves off as infallible and therefore deprives them of the ability to learn (Beck 1992). Paradoxically, whereas reflexivity would appear to me to be a help in such extreme messiness, it may be very difficult to admit ignorance, to dismantle systematically that unscrutinised sense of being in control. Can development studies help donors become more reflexive and thus more effective in working towards their vision?

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[2] Indeed it is for this reason that some donors, such as the World Bank have continued to be very cautious in using rights language, preferring the use of words such as empowerment, because some Executive Directors for domestic political reasons insist on holding the Bank to its Articles.

From the very many donor professionals [3] I have met over the last thirty years I have found that the great majority think of themselves contributing to the progressive realisation of well being for all.[4] In that sense they are profoundly modernist. Because their bread and butter occupation is to manage the transfer of money, the dominant professionals have tended to be economists have tended to be the dominant professionals and development practice is highly positivist. This is described by Grillo (1997) as *the development gaze*, 'an authoritative voice which constructs problems and their solution by reference to a priori criteria'. The gaze is extraordinarily powerful and those inside the bureaucracy that challenge the gaze frequently become captives to it.

On a day to day basis, even for non-economists, it is difficult to be anything other than modernist. For example, from a post-modernist perspective of discourse analysis the logical framework is undoubtedly a Foucauldian disciplinary instrument, used to clear up confusion, regulate unpredictability and objectify those to whom it is applied (Foucault 1991). It is also a very useful planning tool that helps "us" work out what we want to do and how to do it. Hence an interesting challenge for a donor professional is not to accept a meta-narrative nor an (entirely) objective reality out there, yet continue to practice her craft in a community of positivistic fellow craftsmen that has a wholehearted and moral commitment to progress, a commitment which I share (Eyben 2000). Like some academic political anthropologists, I have learnt to be modernist and post-modernist at the same time (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992).

An understanding of the quality of relationships in the world of development practice may contribute to transformational problem solving. Recent work by the IDS Participation Group on power, knowledge and political spaces seeks to operate within and improve the existing order of donor-recipient relations, rather than reject it outright. Here discourse analysis is used, not just to deconstruct, but to illuminate problems as a step towards solving them. Understanding the ways in which poverty knowledge affects poverty policies may enhance the participation in policy processes of those who until now have been excluded (Brock, Cornwall and Gaventa 2001). The Uganda case study linked to this work examines the actors, as well as the policy texts, in the Poverty Reduction Strategy process. It suggests to non-governmental policy actors in Uganda that they reclaim from government and their donors' partners the territory of participation, and to make it more their own again, albeit in the new realm of policy (Brock, McGee and Ssewakiryanga 2002).

Thus commitment to and action for social change do not preclude a reflexivist stance. Nevertheless, most donor professionals are not seeking reflexivity as individuals nor, more importantly, do their organisations encourage them to do so. The emphasis on results-based management has shifted the focus

[3] I label as *donor professionals* the men and women who make an employment career with donor institutions either on a salaried basis or as consultants.

[4] cf Jock Stirrat's (2002) comments in his unpublished paper 'Mercenaries, missionaries and misfits' – 'Scratch the cynical surface and underneath there is a high degree of commitment to development: to a particular set of beliefs and ideas, often ill-conceived and poorly conceptualised and self-contradictory but still there.'

towards 'we know what to do, just give us the money to do it'. Donor professionals seeking to turn that tide, to put the learning organisation into practice, need evidence that will help their organisation do its job better.

Robert Cox's critical theory with regard to international relations (cited by S. Smith 2001) has the strength of mixing theory with the characteristics of professional practice, making a case for international actors to be normative, pragmatic and reflexive. Cox's approach stands apart from the prevailing world order and asks how that order came about; it is a reflective appraisal of the framework that problem-solving takes as given. However, it recognises the existence of problems and has a concern with both practical and technical knowledge interests. It employs a historical eye in contemplating the social and political complex, identifying which elements are universal to world order and which are historically contingent. It is normative because it is in favour of a social and political world order different from the current one, whilst recognising the constraints that history has placed on alternatives. It believes there is potential for transformation within the prevailing order but appreciates how that same order can limit such potential.

Critical theory is concerned with praxis. It recognises the union and mutual constitution of knowledge and practice and then seeks to exploit this awareness to promote "progressive" social change (Scholte 1993). The critical theory approach could encourage donors to look afresh to their contribution to a more equitable system of international relations. New approaches to political anthropology (Gledhill 1994) may also provide some elements of a similar explanatory framework, this time in the context of an ethnographic understanding of face-to-face encounters within the wider system of international relations. Comaroff and Comaroff define ethnography as the study of meaningful practice produced in the interplay of subject and object, of the contingent and the contextual. 'Even macro-historical processes – the building of states, the making of revolutions, the extension of global capitalism – have their feet on the ground and are therefore suitable cases for treatment' (Comaroff and Comaroff 1992). Ethnography in this sense re-validates the importance of "being there" in a particular place and time. It validates individual agency, that is the difference each one of us can make, even as a member of a donor community.

Trained in the Manchester school of social anthropology I maintain a commitment to a social actor approach (Long 1990). Individuals in development cooperation agencies *are* shaped by the historical moment into which they are born (including folk[5] memories of the Thirty Years War) but as agents they can either contribute to the reproduction of existing structures and inequities or, within the constraints of their own situation, they can play a part in helping others in changing the world for the better.

This paper tells the story of what happened when I took back to Bolivia an idea, gleaned from my participation in an IDS workshop on power, procedures and relationships and particularly from a discussion concerning accountability as a key element in rights based approaches to development.[6] The discussion

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[5] By "folk" I mean the bundle of stories, myths and emotions which are transmitted through generations.

[6] Power, Procedures and Relationships Workshop held in IDS in May 2001 (IDS 2001) (Groves and Hinton forthcoming).

concerned the prevalence of distorted lines of accountability between state, civil society and donor actors (explored in detail in Eyben and Ferguson forthcoming). The workshop offered a possible solution to diminishing the distortion. Back in Bolivia the experience gained in pursuit of this idea highlighted for me the significance of donors as political actors. As I have indicated by the story of my grandfather, I hope this paper will encourage a process of self-awareness and a capacity for reflection, helping donor actors to consider the factors that influence the *why*, *how* and *with whom* they engage in promoting human rights and good governance. Although there is a growing literature concerning development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as learning organisations,[7] so far much less has been published concerning the challenges facing highly politicised official bilateral agencies.[8]

1.2 Studying the donor community

This paper has another, more academic objective, to contribute to the anthropology of donors as a community. The study of the donor community has been relatively little explored although this is changing (c.f. Stanley 2001). The term itself is commonly used by those who see themselves as members of that community as well as by others who relate to that "community", as aid receivers or observers. It is commonly understood to mean a global figurative institution that is made up of many actual organisations. It is peopled by "development professionals", staff who work both for their own organisation and see themselves as members of the wider community that possesses its own customs, norms and practices. *Community* does not of course imply harmony or stasis nor are the boundaries always well maintained. As evidenced by the reference to the Thirty Years War internal tensions and conflicts may arise from the community's external relations and from the individual members of that community's relations with other sets of actors and their histories and structures.

For the last 25 years I have been a member of this community, for most of that time as fully engaged participant hired and initially defined by my employers as a social anthropologist. I started in project work and then shifted to national and global policy engagement, seeking to contribute to what is now called a rights-based approach. I was less sure of my status as anthropologist, perhaps because I was not so labelled by academic anthropologists. Both they and I perhaps felt more comfortable with an identity as a development bureaucrat who could communicate with anthropologists. It was only when any identity as a social scientist disappeared, when I became head of a country office that I felt more free to engage as an observer as well as participant in the politics of donor action.

This paper is written by a practitioner who has tried to be reflexive but for much of the time has failed. At the most I have been reflective, that is I took into account the point of view and situation of the

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7 c.f. the special edition of *Development in Practice* (August 2002).

8 An exception is the article by Samuel Musyoki in the special edition mentioned above concerning Dutch support to a rural development programme in Kenya.

"recipient" but without any rigorous challenging of *all* my taken for granted assumptions. It may be helpful to see the challenge as a continuum from complete egocentricity at one end, through some capacity to reflect on how one's own historical and cultural baggage and personal situation can influence one's perceptions and actions, through to a constant capacity to unpack and question all assumptions all of the time.

One of the critiques of participant observation is the impossibility of achieving any pretence at objectivity. Borneman (1998) comments that one of the responses to this critique has been to embrace textual analysis and to prioritise "representations" over discursive practices. Such a response is probably even more likely when the ethnographer is denied the opportunity of "being there". The traditional anthropologist could put up his tent in a village and the natives did not have the power or authority to tell him to go away.[9] Anthropologists of organisations generally have to be invited in (Kaufman 1997). Such an invitation will not be issued unless those in charge are convinced the presence of the ethnographer will produce some useful outcome for the organisation as well as for the ethnographer. Even if so invited, the ethnographer's access may be severely limited and controlled. Hence, by default rather than intent, the recourse to representations.[10]

My case was the reverse. By definition a donor professional, I had no problem of access. I was one of the very actors that I was observing. *My* problem was two-fold. First, I became so engaged in the action, I often forgot to observe myself, let alone situate that observation in relation to my personal history and professional status. Second, the frame of reference for observing others and myself was shaped by my engagement in the process. My ethnographic eye had a very particular focus. Self-evidently, those other actors with whom I engaged would have had a very different observational stance. These others would have included fellow members of the donor community; those at first glance most similar to me.

Hence the story I narrate in section two must be open to academic criticism of partiality and bias. In this case, is it a story worth telling? If I define *worthiness* as contributing to development praxis, then I hope it will be. My story is partial, passionate and personal (Stanley 2001). I experienced a range of emotions as the events unfolded, including anger and despair as well as delight in newfound friends and the growth of trust. My story includes myself as an object of observation. As Pels (2000) comments, this approach 'emphatically includes the experiencing observer . . . that provides the basis for critical or therapeutic judgements'. In proposing a conceptual framework for the telling of my story I shall take an approach proposed by Pels. *One-step up reflexivity* aims at freeing some conceptual space between two unattractive epistemological alternatives (1) the discourse of straightforward naturalism where the narrator as an object of observation disappears or (2) the infinite spiralling of meta-discourse which adds layers and layers of reflexivity.

[9] On reading this Rosemary McGee commented that, while the niceties of today's research ethics scorn this traditional approach, it still happens but is just more subtle. In other words, the power to open doors is contingent on who you are and who is funding you.

[10] See Verlot's review of Shore's study of the European Commission, which he criticises for looking too much at the policies and not sufficiently at the daily practices of the policy-makers. He argues there is no substitute for participant observation.

In place of either of these, Pels offers only one level of self-reference, not more, so as to display the narrative's interpretative point of departure and point of return. This approach accepts the constitutive weakness at the heart of the narrative: it is just another story and someone else would tell it differently. Indeed, as Pels points out, this is the strength of the approach. At some point others must step in to take over some of the reflexive burden and cross their different explanations with mine. Telling my story in this way may encourage alternative stories from others.

Reflexivity is however particularly challenging for a person of relatively high status and power. It is not comfortable for anyone committed to social and political justice to inquire into one's own behaviour as a member of an elite cosmopolitan group, the donor community. Reflexivity is commonly used in a more pure research context, and allows researchers to demonstrate to others their own historical and geographical locus in developing the research question and in deciding what to say and what not to say (McGee 2002). Thus reflexive participatory research contains an element of behaviour change but it is still principally seen as change in behaviour between the researcher and the people with whom they are researching. Experiential learning for policy-makers seeks to take this approach into the arena of action (McGee op.cit). Current work by IDS Participation Group with various donor organisations is taking this even further by supporting processes of organisational change. The present paper is a contribution to this process.

2 Conceiving the donor community

I understand by "community" much of the meaning generally given it by social science, that is an association in which membership is characterised by being exclusive, of long duration and with members united by sentiment with shared values, norms and practices. Unlike the *gemeinschaft* notion of community, my use of the term is not however associated with a particular territory. *Community* in the world of international relations and development practice bears one of three qualifiers: the international community, the development community and the donor community. The first variously means the G8 group of states, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, or everyone with a seat at the United Nations, UN agencies and International Finance Institutions (IFIs), as well as those who have the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) observer status as an international NGO. It is value-laden as a concept and thus precious to those who use it, that is principally people who define themselves, and who are defined by others in that community, as members. From my brief incursion into the literature, I understand that International Relations speaks of *global political actors* that include a much wider range of actors, including trans-national corporations and "non-legitimate transnational actors" (Willets 2001). This is certainly wider than the meaning conventionally given to *international community*. Even so, the boundaries of the international community are fuzzy and disputed, as for example, when transnational corporations become delegates at

United Nations conferences. Firmly and undisputedly however within those boundaries is a sub-community that describes itself as the donor community.

My impression is that this public and non-contested recognition of a *donor community* is itself fairly new, as I do not recollect its use at the start of my career. What may have occurred is a growing formalisation of a locus of relations, practice and values that for those of us inside has *felt* for a long time very much like a true community.[11] The development community is composed of donor professionals, employed by government departments, such as DFID or the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida), international organisations such as the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and international NGOs such as CARE or Oxfam. Those in that community who are employed by government departments seek to distinguish themselves from their fellow bureaucrats working as diplomats (who are part of the wider international community) and seek to protect their boundaries against frequent and often successful raids by the diplomats to capture them. The donor community is active at the global and at the recipient country level. As a community it defines itself on the basis of us-them. The most significant "them" are the "recipients". Without recipients the donor community could not exist.

Do we need to distinguish grant-giving organisations and those who make loans? Many organisations in the donor community do both grants and loans, including large government donors such as Japan and Germany. Others, such as the World Bank provide small amounts of grants but primarily extend credit. In low income countries the credit is provided in the form of very "soft" (long term, low interest) loans so that many economists would see an International Development Association credit as comparable to a gift. Indeed it is a gift in the sense that the World Bank is managing that money on behalf of government donors who make grants to IDA. In other cases what arrives in the country as a grant, is handed down by the central government in the form of a loan, for example in India. Some academic observers in the development community note the importance of distinguishing between grants and soft loans. The donor community itself does not usually make much of this distinction, nor, on the whole do its government counterparts; a more significant fission within the community between multilateral and bilateral agencies is based on governance and accountability issues. Donor government staff are part of the back home institutional and political arrangements that, through their countries' Executive Directors, shape the decisions of the Boards of the IFIs. Multilateral staff are linked back to head office administration that seeks to keep the Executive Directors uninformed and without teeth.

Lastly, the *development community* is more inclusive and heterogeneous than the donor community. While it includes donors as defined above, it also extends to all development NGOs, global advocacy organisations and academics studying "development". Much of the development community is financially dependent on the

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[11] When I was working as a full-time consultant in the 1980s I would regularly change planes at Addis Ababa airport that had a hub function for flights inside Africa. I would predictably find fellow members of the community sitting in the transit lounge whom I already knew and with whom I could swap gossip and tips of the trade.

donor community even when challenging donor ideology and practice. All three inter-locking communities, international, donor and development, operate at the local (country) level and trans-nationally.

One way of considering the donor community and its capacity to influence, is in terms of Latham's description of *social sovereignty* (2000). Social sovereignty is more restricted in its powers than hegemony and, unlike hegemony, does not necessarily entail the formation of an integrated political or social order. A key marker for identifying the types of social domain that are relevant to social sovereignty is the degree to which upon entering a domain an agent is compelled to occupy or resist a role or place within the webs of codes, practices and signficances that constitute that domain. In that sense, we may see the donor community possessing social sovereignty over the domain of development practice, that is practice which is viewed by themselves and others as pertaining to *development* as a concept. Thus donors establish the rules for other actors, state and non-state, who engage with donors in development. The extent to which the community exercises *political* sovereignty is a moot point. The story I tell in the next section would indicate that donors might not have as much power to bring about change as the extent of their social sovereignty might have indicated. My view may however be influenced by an insider's perspective that typically notes that power is always somewhere else and not in one's own domain.

Latham developed the concept of social sovereignty to explore how the nation state is challenged by other sovereignties that have more control over a domain than the state itself has, for example, financial markets. The donor community, albeit less strongly, possesses certain of these same characteristics. Nation state employees in the community may have more in common with each other than with their fellow bureaucrats or citizens back home. Others entering the development domain, recipient government officials, local NGO leaders, donor government diplomats recognise and respond to the web of codes, practices and significances of the sovereignty of the development community. At the recipient country level the coherence of the local donor community, and its capacity to exercise sovereignty, is contingent not only on the extent to which the country is aid-dependent but also on a range of other political factors. The Bolivia case study will seek to illustrate these.

Considered another way, donor professionals are a sub-class of a global elite of cosmopolitan citizens, a class of professionals whose commitment is to their profession (Isin and Wood 1999) rather than to any particular locus. Unlike other home-type cosmopolitan citizens who travel a lot but stay most of the time in their home country many donor professionals do not only live symbolically in a global frame of reference, but like employees of transnational corporations, they are full-time and long term global nomads, or as I propose below, vagabonds. They move every few years to an encounter with another culture but, as Hannerz (1990) argues, the foot-loose cosmopolitan may not only move sequentially from one foreign culture to another, he or she may also be involved with a culture of another kind, that which is carried by a transnational network, rather than by territory. Wherever they go, they find others who will interact with them in terms of specialised but collectively held understandings. If that network is sufficiently bounded and has a shared common vision,

then arguably, as is the case with donor professionals, it becomes a community. I have sometimes heard donor agency staff refer to themselves as a community of development *pilgrims*, implying that they are forever on the road but with a clear vision of the celestial city in sight. Thus they are part of a global donor community within the wider international global community.

Its qualifier reveals one special characteristic of the *donor* community. It is a community whose identity is established and maintained through giving, that is making gifts to others, and thus experiences all the perils discerned by anthropologist in their analysis of the gift relationship (Stirrat and Henkel 1997). The relationship between donor and recipient is not equal because donors do not expect a material return. This is even less so now than in the days of the Cold War when aid was often directly linked to global politics, or when aid was more self-evidently tied to goods and human resources from the donor country. Today the gift appears genuinely more moral, it is for the "other" without apparently expecting a return (Bauman 1993) other than the commitment to reduce poverty, In that sense, to pursue Bauman's argument, the relationship is becoming more "oppressive" because the recipient cannot give anything back. "There is a thin line between care and oppression, and the trap of unconcern awaits those who draw it and proceed cautiously as they beware of trespassing" (Bauman op.cit).

The gift relationship between donors and recipient governments is further problematised because the local donor community is a guest in the receiving country. Hospitality marks a contextual definition of relative rank. Symbolically the host is always superior and as Herzfeld (1992) describes poor hosts will lavish their hospitality on much richer visitors to counter-balance their lower economic status. In such a case we would expect the host government to provide lavish parties for their donor guests. However, they are constrained by severe resource constraints and the need to demonstrate that they are spending those scarce resources on meeting the needs of their citizens rather than entertaining foreigners. Interestingly, the members of the local donor community show no such compunction and frequently entertain each other and their host government counterparts. These receptions have a number of purposes. First they provide individuals within the community with the means to display and promote their own status by the number of people they can attract to their reception, [12] second they allow members of the community to do business together and strengthen community ties through gossip; third, if we follow Herzfeld's argument, they allow the donors to counter-balance any inferiority they may be feeling as *guests*, by turning themselves back into *hosts*.

Finally, it must not be forgotten that the members of an in-country donor community are nearly all employees of large bureaucracies whose head office is *back home* in some other part of the world. Each of their bureaucracies has much in common but also notorious differences. These include, for example, the application of aid procedures that donor head offices struggle to harmonise against the objections of their respective national accounting offices. Herzfeld argues that state bureaucrats are intimately connected with the

[12] In Bolivia this was explicitly recognised and described as *el poder del convacatorio* (the power to convoke or summon).

reproduction of nationalism and that in support of that nationalism they see their manner of doing things in terms of ideal *models* compared with the corrupt *practices* of the other cultures they encounter. Although donors may believe their own ideal models are better than their fellow's observed practice, the donors join up together to agree that the practices of the recipient bureaucracy are much worse. Hence the other is the "poor performer", never ourselves.

Another facet of the reproduction of nationalism is taken for granted assumptions about our own culture and history. We assume our values to be the right values and that these are ones commonly shared within the donor community, as distinct from the culture of the "other", the recipient, which by definition is likely to be different. In other words members of different donor agencies will assume on a day to day basis that "we" are the same and that the "others" are different. Interestingly, members of a donor community rarely remember that their own fathers and grandfathers were engaged in systematic slaughter of each other in defence of separate value systems and that some of our countries have been more or less on hostile terms since the Middle Ages and earlier. These recollections tend to emerge only in carefully managed events such as watching World Cup matches or in local sporting contests.

2.1 The donor community in a local space

A donor community is intrinsically a political presence in any country, a presence that seeks to influence change in that country through its intellectual and financial engagement with national and international actors and institutions. In that shared effort, there are intense internal political struggles for leadership and voice. Authority and leadership within the community are primarily achieved through the capacity to exert patronage through the construction of networks of clients in and outside government in the receiving country, as well as with fellow donors. Such capacity is only partly contingent on financial resources available; it also requires access to information, and social and political competence.

Stanley (op.cit) considers the donor community in a rather similar way although her focus is on "development workers" in a large international NGO dependent on a bilateral donor, United States Agency for International Development (USAID). For them "the field" is where the work of development is said to take place and where so much meaning is located. Significantly when the donor community, as in Bolivia shifts to policy-related grants rather than funding projects the "field" shrinks in significance. Although the meaning – poor people primarily in rural areas – remains, these people become even more distant from the day to day donor practice as, unlike the Stanley description, there is no longer any need to visit them.

Put very simply, any donor actor finds herself not only a member of the local donor community but also placed at the nexus of three over-lapping circles or sets of relationships, norms and practices that influence her action and, through her mediation, impact also upon each other. I see such a person to be in a highly ambiguous situation, standing at the cognitive, cultural and political boundaries of three different structures

and histories, which I shall call "spaces" and which shape her potential for action. Furthermore, as a unique individual, she brings to these relationships her own personal history and values.

Appadurai (1996) uses the term *ethnoscape* to describe the landscape of persons who travel between shifting worlds. In relation to the way the local donor community confronts the three sets of structures/actors that I have postulated, another way of thinking about this landscape, is the idea of *contact zone,* social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other at intersections of equally centred entities (Merry 2001, citing Pratt 1992). The donor community in a specific country and individuals within it are at such a contact zone and are shaped and informed by these spaces of knowledge and action. Speaking of myself as "Ego", as the head of the local office of a bilateral donor, I had to simultaneously manage relations with specific individuals and organisations operating from out of these three spaces, the global donor community, the local "recipient" space where we resided and third "back home" in Britain. Of the three, I shared the first two with my Dutch, Danish or other bilateral and multilateral counterparts.

The third set was specific to my organisation and concerned relations to the government and citizens who paid my salary. At the local level I shared this set with my colleagues in DFID and with the British Embassy staff. Bolivian staff working in DFID and the Embassy belonged only partially to "back home" as in one sense they were representatives from the local recipient space who had been invited into our "back home" space. Their ambivalent situation was becoming more apparent as the donor community moved from "technical" to "political" engagement. Stanley (op.cit) also stresses that donor relations cannot be discussed in simple terms of local recipients and foreign advisers, referring also to the national professional staff working in donor agencies. In Bolivia the boundaries are also blurred between the global donor community and the recipients due to the fact that senior officials in government may previously have worked for a multilateral institution in Washington or New York and may well do so again with a change of government. Even when working as government officials those with close professional ties with the donor community join in many shared social events.

The first and most significant set for how I spent my time and energy was the global *donor community* of which the community in Bolivia was a local part and which in itself is a sub-set of the global international and development communities. My time included managing relations with my fellow local donor community members as well as with local members of other parts of the international and development communities, such as colleagues' Ambassadors or the local Oxfam representative. I also had to meet frequent visitors from the global donor community, such as visiting vice-presidents of the World Bank or heads of colleagues' agencies Latin American departments. At each encounter we would exchange news and gossip about mutual friends and acquaintances. Because I had previously been a long-serving member of the global community working at the global policy level I actually knew many of these visitors. This prior acquaintance was an asset that gave me higher status within the local donor community and to some extent compensated for the relatively small size of the DFID budget in Bolivia.

2.2 Conceiving recipients

How do donors conceive recipients? An appreciation of recipients as political actors who are engaged in significant internal power struggles is remarkably still very new in the global donor community. It has long been a habit of ignoring history. Despite a growing interest by development studies in the long-term processes of change and continuity, much of the donor community still tends to take snapshots of the present, rather than to consider what happened in the past and how this could affect the future. Like tourists we take pains to exclude from our frame any image of unpleasant reality that does not fit our concept of how the place should be. And again, like tourists, we only stay for a short time, three years on average, generally mixing with those with whom we feel most comfortable and who may only provide us with a partial and particular perspective on the country's history.

Until very recently political science was not a significant discipline from which donor agencies recruited their staff. Academic studies of politics in developing (recipient) countries were rarely read by those in the donor community (Carothers 1999). Even donors concerned to promote and strengthen democracies took a technical approach, ignoring the realities of power and the intricacies of politics (Unsworth 2002). Donors' counterparts were therefore conceived as technical people who could receive training (capacity development) and money to implement shared goals of modernising the state. Programmes of civil service reform were designed to tackle patronage and enhance accountability but without consideration as to the political agenda that the modernising technocrats might be following in their pursuit of these goals. Furthermore, there was a common tendency to homogenise recipient governments rather than seek to understand the power struggles taking place within every government, including, of course, those "back home".

Donors still tend to operate on the basis of fairly simple models of recipients as government and civil society. The private sector is in the wings as important, but subject to neglect as it is not usually eligible to receive gifts. Civil society as an instrument for advocacy for poverty reduction has become increasingly important in donor eyes during the last decade or so. However, as with the view of government, civil society was also conceived as homogenous, as well as intrinsically virtuous. There was an assumption that human rights, anti-corruption and government accountability were universal values rather than partisan issues (Carothers op.cit).

Thus during the last decade or so donors have expanded their interest in supporting civil society organisations, including governmental transparency and civil and political rights more generally (Carothers and Ottaway 2000). This support is based on the argument that a strong civil society is required to achieve and maintain good government advocating for citizens and demanding accountability. According to Tendler (1998) current wisdom sees civil society's special advantage lying in its outsider status or independence from government. However, she suggests there has been a tendency to exaggerate the extent to which civil society can counteract the rent-seeking tendencies of government. Civil society is not all virtue and government all vices. She argues that successful examples of achieving good government show that the state itself plays an

important role in fostering civil society's capacity to hold the state accountable and that alliances between reformers in civil society and government may be an important key to better government.

Political analysis and studies of power relations are thus becoming new tools in the donor kit. A problem for donors, not yet fully appreciated, is that just as there is no impartial civil society, so neither are there non-partisan political scientists. A concern with understanding recipient politics and governance issues is leading to the recruitment of national governance specialists who may well bring with them their own political agenda. A second problem for donors relates to recipients, just like donors, preferring not to wash their dirty linen in public, such as corrupt practices or political in-fighting unless they see a very good reason to do so. It is easy to forget to inquire as to why such information should be volunteered. The extent and quality of information is therefore contingent on the political objectives of the provider.

By and large, most members of donor communities have not yet adopted the new agenda of understanding recipient politics and political processes. In some cases, the "development" people leave this to their diplomats who tend to focus on the froth of politics and less on the issues of deep structure and history that may influence the current scene. In other cases, understanding the recipient is not a priority in the day to day busy-ness of being a donor. The shift to working in a coordinated manner with other donors can reinforce the tendency for the community as a whole to become inward looking and self-referential. Finally, there may well be an attitude of mind that recognises the complexity and multi-layered nature of "back home" and global community issues with which donors are more familiar but tends to homogenise that which is most strange and different the society of the recipients

3 The story of donor efforts to fund accountability in Bolivia

3.1 The donor community in Bolivia

Bolivia is the poorest country in South America. It is characterised in the global donor community as one of those heavily aid dependent countries where donors are most coordinated and work best together; donor professionals visiting Bolivia comment favourably on the strength and cohesion of the community. This is variously attributed to Bolivian government leadership that provided a framework for government-donor coordination, el *Nuevo Marco de Relacionamiento*, to the devolution of decision-making authority to country offices as a result of this New Framework and Bolivia's complementary role as a Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) pilot with the World Bank; and, finally to the contingency of several members of the local community possessing strong leadership skills at that time.

The community had fuzzy borders with a strong core of members and others who either chose to dip in and out or who were specifically excluded by the core because they were seen to be not really one of us. This perception related to the function of the excluded rather than to the personality of the person holding that function. Members perceived as difficult or highly irritating people by the majority of others in the community

were accorded full formal membership by virtue of their office. However, they would often be excluded from informal planning meetings that would take place during social events or lunches arranged through word of mouth to avoid e-mails being sent on to those uninvited.

Community leadership was foreign but Bolivians could belong by virtue of their employment in a donor agency, although their status could be ambiguous as discussed above. Foreigners in International NGOs (INGOs) had marginal status in the community but Bolivians running the local branch of an INGO were not perceived as members. The core membership consisted of foreigners working for official international organisations such as the IFIs and United Nations agencies, and those working for bilateral government programmes. Core members varied to the extent to which they saw themselves first and foremost as development professionals or as diplomats. This depended on their career profile more than on their formal status in an embassy or development cooperation office.

The UN agencies tended to have inferior status because they had few resources of their own, spending the money of the bilaterals. The International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the Inter American Development Bank (IDB) were the most weighty agencies in the community and the bilaterals (this is the perspective I am writing from) feared them as potential bully boys who would seek to do things in secret with the government, excluding the rest of the community from their decisions. This fear would have been more fully justified if the local IFI representatives had been able to join forces but they were constrained by the structurally difficult relations between their respective head offices in Washington. Even so, the bilaterals saw them as a threat to their own power and influence and thus the leaders of the bilateral faction established their own "like-minded" group to achieve a counter-balance. The "like-mindeds" would meet regularly for lunch to plot tactics. Before the annual Consultative Group meetings between donors and government, the like-mindeds would prepare intensively to achieve a common position at the meeting.

DFID in Bolivia is small in comparison with the large programmes DFID manages in many countries in Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa; in absolute terms it is also one of the smallest bilateral programmes in Bolivia (similar to that of Belgium). Second, it is in Latin America, a part of the world where many in DFID think we should not be engaged. For many years British aid had been run from London and in support of localised projects in health and agriculture. In 2000 following my arrival there, it established a country office and increased its contribution to the broader national policy agenda, including an active engagement in the consultations around the Poverty Reduction Strategy. It provided more resources, committed itself to working in close coordination with other donors under the leadership of the government and established strategic relations with civil society (DFID 2002). For me personally this new way of working for DFID was an endeavour to explore the extent to which a small member of the community (in terms of our budget) could influence processes of political change in favour of sustained poverty reduction.

3.2 The context of encounter

It is a challenge for donors to understand those long-term processes that have led to Bolivia being classified today as a highly indebted, aid dependent poor country with equally high levels of social unrest.[13] The economic and political history of Bolivia since the Spanish conquest may be crudely summarised as that of a small ruling elite making a living from the exploitation and export of primary raw materials. It did this by controlling an indigenous labour force that both worked in the export sector and provided the food for feeding itself and the elite. The deep political structures of Bolivia's history are commonly typified as clientist and patrimonial (World Bank 2000) excluding the great majority of the population from influencing the policies which affect their lives except in a reactive fashion and when under severe pressure. The first half of the last century saw the growth of a self-conscious working class and the development of a trade union movement that identified poverty as a class issue but in recent years, the political identity of the excluded has been shifting to one based on ethnicity.

For many years Bolivia's reputation was one of political instability – of military governments and peasant rebellions. From 1982, with the re-establishment of democracy and subsequent major economic reforms, its reputation changed. It became for the global donor community an example of a developing country that wholeheartedly adopted the "Washington Consensus" model of economic development. Nevertheless, members of the in-country donor community shared a perception that the Bolivian State should be required to be more accountable to its citizens. The government of ex-dictator President Banzer (1997–2001) was seen as particularly corrupt.

In the mid-1990s, under the previous administration, local government was introduced through the Law of Popular Participation. This included the setting up of vigilance committees at the local government level that were conceived as a system of social oversight by citizens of each municipality over their elected representatives. This was a breakthrough in concepts of public accountability in Bolivia and one that was further pursued during and after the process of consultation around Bolivia's Poverty Reduction Strategy.

The National Dialogue of 2000,[14] associated with the Poverty Reduction Strategy process was a response to the requirement of the global donor community that there should be broad-based consultation in order to secure debt relief. The Dialogue was an important milestone for enhancing citizens' participation in state policy and programme development. It also revealed the extent to which those involved were engaged in a fierce political struggle over the nature of accountability. Foot-dragging by President Banzer and his entourage resisted those reformers in government, led by Vice-President Quiroga, who were anxious to proceed with the consultation. This delay allowed the Catholic Church to run its own consultation process, the Jubilee 2000 Forum, before the official, state-run Dialogue could be started. The Forum included many other civil society

[13] This part is summarised from Eyben (forthcoming)

[14] For further English-language discussion of the National Dialogue see Christian Aid (2002) and Eyben (forthcoming 2003)

organisations as well as the Church but for those designing the National Dialogue it was seen as less legitimate than their process. The National Dialogue was designed and implemented by architects and stout defenders of the Law of Popular Participation and thus in contrast to the Jubilee Forum, consultation was based primarily on representation from the local authorities rather than from civil society with the Church as self-selected leader.

The Bolivian Bishops Conference had formed a Jubilee 2000 group in March 1998, taking advantage of a church partnership with two dioceses in Germany active in the global Jubilee 2000 movement. In Bolivia, as in Latin America generally, the Catholic Church has shaped a large part of civil society and educational, health and social welfare establishments were almost all the responsibility of the Church until the middle of the nineteenth century (Shifter 2000). In the twentieth century the State assumed an increasing responsibility for these services but most children of the elite continue to go to Catholic schools. During the 1970s and early 1980s the Catholic Church in Bolivia after considerable internal conflict (Quiroga 2001) was active in the struggle to regain democracy and human rights. Following the re-establishment of democracy the Church appeared interested in maintaining a key interest in being a leading protagonist for human rights and conflict resolution.

Because Bolivia is one of the few remaining countries in Latin America in which the Catholic Church still retains a special status, it has considerable legitimacy in playing a political role. Religious freedom and separation of Church and State are issues yet to be fully resolved. The Catholic Church is recognised as the State Church. Article 3 of the Constitution establishes that 'the State recognises and sustains the Roman, Apostolic, Catholic church' while guaranteeing the freedom of worship to members of other religions. In common practice, the Church also receives special recognition with the President, and his ministers, formally attending the main festivals and rites of the Church in his capacity as head of state. Any analysis of civil society in Bolivia and the development of new state institutions must take into account the status and interest of the Church. Although, as elsewhere in Latin America, there are a growing number of poor people who have left the Catholic Church to join evangelical Protestant churches, the great majority of the population still has high regard for the Church. The beating up of a bishop by Aymara demonstrators during roadblocks on the Bolivian altiplano was considered with horror by most people.[15] The Church was clearly playing an important and influential role in the years of the Banzer presidency in arbitrating between a weak and divided government and those contesting its authority.

Scaling up the local government social oversight mechanism, introduced through the Law of Popular Participation, to the departmental and national level was the chief recommendation emerging from the Jubilee 2000 Forum. During the subsequent government-run National Dialogue the Church campaigned energetically to include in the Dialogue's conclusions what it described as *un mecanismo del control social*, the intention being to

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[15] However, there was a tradition of resistance to the Church as a colonial oppressor by Aymara rebel groups. During the 1899 uprising, for example, a number of priests were killed (Diana Urioste pers. comm.)

replicate at the Departmental and National levels the vigilance committee system established at the local government level through the Law of Popular Participation. As a result of the Church's lobbying, the Dialogue in September 2000, with the consent of the government, requested the Church to consult with civil society and to develop this mechanism. The structure, management and tasks of this mechanism were to now become vigorously contested between those parts of civil society who were attached to the Church and those who had an independent agenda. Prominent among the latter was the *Comité Enlace*.

The *Comité Enlace* is an apex organisation founded in 1999 and composed of associations representing self-employed workers in the informal economy, many of whom had been previously employees in the now privatised and greatly reduced formal economy. They maintain class-consciousness and couch their political activity as a struggle for labour rights. The *Comité Enlace* became very active during the Poverty Reduction Strategy paper (PRSP) consultation process, challenging the government's model of poverty reduction that conceives poverty as a lack of access to basic social services without reference to livelihoods. As a result of its efforts the final draft of the PRSP gave some recognition to livelihoods as a poverty issue and the associated legislation gave a voice to "producers" in the formal machinery of local government.

Meanwhile donors had been working hard with reformers in government to build greater accountability of the state towards its citizens. A significant achievement has been the establishment of the office of the *Defensor del Pueblo* in 1998. With a mandate somewhere between that of the office of Ombudsman and national human rights commissions in other parts of the world, it has been one of the most successful elements in Bolivia's institutional and democratic reforms over the last few years. The office has successfully maintained its autonomy and has demonstrated its willingness to challenge the State when it notes human rights abuses. It is universally respected for its impartiality and has made a significant contribution to the management of conflicts between state and civil society during the social unrest of last year. Limited funding from state resources resulted in the *Defensoria* seeking help from donors who encouraged the institution to develop a five-year comprehensive policy and resources plan to which donors could contribute through an non-earmarked basket fund arrangement.

Prior to the establishment of the *Defensoria*, the Catholic Church had been the single most influential institution concerned with human rights. It seems to me that the establishment of the office of the *Defensor del Pueblo* may have been seen by the Church as a potential threat to its special status.[16] The Church perhaps needed to reinforce its claim to be the principal defender of citizens' rights against the state and may well have contributed to the Church's decision to claim centre stage during the National Dialogue and to take the lead

[16] In the time I was in Bolivia, the Church and the *Defensoria* usually worked together on human rights and conflict issues but I grew to learn about the tension existing between them as the *Defensoria* gained increasing credibility. Although the first *Defensoria* had been the editor of the national Catholic newspaper, *La Presencia*, she began to feel that the Church should have been prepared to give up some of its influence following the strengthening of state human rights institutions.

on efforts to strengthen the state's accountability.[17] This may be one of the reasons why the Church decided to make a great issue at the National Dialogue of social oversight as an outcome of the National Dialogue.

3.3 The story

As mentioned earlier, any community seeks to hide its internal struggles from its external interlocutors who, in turn, will seek to find out and exploit any internal conflict. The story I tell is only a partial account. First, I am still too attached to (or dependent on?) my old community to spill all its secrets to an outside readership, nor would it be ethical to provide such detail that particular persons could be identified. Second, much of my knowledge of the struggle inside the recipient community is necessarily influenced by what I was able or allowed to discover and hence partial.

Soon after arriving in La Paz I explored whether DFID could or should join those other donors already supporting the government's institutional reform programme (IRP). The IRP aimed to create the institutional framework for a "modern public sector" to deliver Bolivia's poverty reduction strategy**.** Although the World Bank's Project Appraisal noted the importance of involving civil society, along with other stakeholders, I found absent any strategic and programmatic action to enhance vertical accountability, that is between state and citizens.[18] Very little action had been taken to communicate the IRP goals to a wider public or to encourage any civil society interest in the efforts at reform.

Despite the prevalence of the notion in the academic literature, in the Bolivian donor community it was still unusual to propose that non-state institutions and citizens' movements could play a vital role in supporting the IRP in its aim to create a responsive and accountable central and local government.[19] As I discuss later, the means by which many donors tend to support civil society possibly prevented them from thinking about connections between state and society. Furthermore, many people in the government would be hostile to the idea and therefore donors would be discouraged from proposing it.

I wondered how a donor, such as DFID, could legitimately support citizens' monitoring and advocacy in such an environment. I concluded that one reasonably safe activity would be expanding citizens' access to information concerning government policies and processes and their rights and entitlements under the Constitution. This was in line with the DFID Human Rights Strategy that proposes actions to promote rights to information as central to increasing the accountability of both state and non-state organisations.

DFID commissioned from a resident British academic and consultant, James Blackburn, a concept development note to identify how donors could support poor people's realisation of the right to information.

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[17] Some anti-clerical Bolivians commented that the Church badly needed the additional funds it would acquire from foreign donors if it took this lead.

[18] I analysed the extent to which Bolivia enjoyed a "substantive democracy" drawing on Moore and Putzel's 1999 paper.

[19] This would have been a view shared by USAID but that agency was not supporting the IRP because of its tendency to maintain one-to-one relations with the Bolivian Government and not to join other donors in initiatives led by the World Bank.

We asked him to explore what could be done to provide citizens and organisations with the knowledge and information they needed to participate effectively in what it was hoped would become an on-going and government instigated National Dialogue on poverty reduction.

The study identified three groups of primary stakeholders requiring assistance to realise their right to information: (1) the mass of poor people who are furthest removed from the state; women and non-Spanish seekers being high priority in this group; (2) civil society intermediaries, including representative bodies and the media; and (3) members of political parties. Also identified were future providers of services, including organisations whose principal mission is to increase the transparency of the state such as the *Defensor del Pueblo*, media specialists and organisations promoting various human rights, for example economic literacy (Blackburn 2000).

From the start, I saw this approach as a "mirror" to the IRP. "Mirror" would support, what is commonly called in donor jargon, the "demand" side while IRP supported the "supply" side. This meant engaging the interest of those reformers in government who were taking forward IRP against considerable opposition from many politicians in the ruling coalition. During and after the study a number of discussions were held with the leading official responsible for IRP to encourage his interest in seeing civil society as a potential ally in the reform efforts. It also meant gaining the interest and support of other donors. We saw our close relationship with the rest of the bilateral community as critical for engaging effectively in supporting reform efforts. We were reaching the position where almost all new activities were being undertaken in collaboration with one or more partners in the donor community (DFID 2002). The project could not therefore proceed without enthusiastic support from others in our own community.

Meanwhile, in early 2001 the Ministry of Finance had established a number of government-donor working groups to pursue key areas of concern in the implementation of Bolivia's Poverty Reduction Strategy. One of these (Group Four) was to tackle *participation* and *social integration*. Group Four's steering committee consisted of two government and two donor representatives (UNDP and DFID) and was chaired by the same very senior official also responsible for the IRP. He was very close to the reformist Vice-President, Quiroga. Included in our terms of reference was donor support for civil society's monitoring of the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy.

At this juncture, and before Group Four had fully established its terms of reference, I returned to Britain for a week to participate in an IDS workshop on Power, Procedures and Relationships and I returned to La Paz with an idea for our steering committee that had been discussed at the workshop. *This idea concerned the distorted lines of accountability that occur when donors fund civil society to hold the state accountable.* Donor procedures and reporting requirements, their accountability to politicians and taxpayers back home, result in the imposition of new forms of conditionality on these organisations. The implications of log frames and other requirements are that organisations become shaped by the aims of the donor and that donors want to fund civil society organisations that reflect their own agendas. Other donors in Bolivia were already supporting a range of such

activities, sometimes directly but more commonly through the intermediation of northern NGOs. DFID's own "Mirror" concept ran this very risk of distorting the accountability lines.

My three fellow members of the steering committee received the IDS workshop idea with enthusiasm. We agreed that the way donors were currently funding Bolivian civil society was neither transparent nor equitable. In lieu of their primary function of strengthening lines of accountability between state and society, there was a risk of particular civil society organisations developing clientelistic relations with particular donors (or their northern NGO intermediaries). We therefore concluded that donors and civil society recipients should be encouraged to terminate their one-to-one relationships and, instead, to support the establishment of a constitutionally protected "foundation", similar in status to the *Defensor del Pueblo*, independent from the government but established by law. The foundation would be funded by donors (and in the longer run by private citizens and business) and would finance social oversight activities of civil society.

In pursuit of this idea, we included within the working group's programme a study on how to establish sustainable and transparent arrangements by which civil society, particularly poor and excluded groups, could:

- develop their capacity to participate in the policy process
- realise their right to information
- participate with representatives of the state in policy consultation processes.

In June, the steering group sought the approval of Group Four for developing a draft proposal for a pilot project to be implemented by UNDP and to be financed by interested donors through a basket fund arrangement. This pilot project would draw on UNDPs prior experience in managing a basket fund in support of civil society's participation in National Dialogue 2000. The objectives of the project would be to test the feasibility of establishing a foundation to which all parts of civil society, including the social control mechanism, could apply for funding in the realisation of the three objectives listed above. At that stage we saw it very much as a gradual process that over time would encourage donors to give up their patronage relations with elements of Bolivian civil society.

Following the resignation of President Banzer in August 2001, and his succession as ad interim President by the reformist Vice-President, the chairman of our working group had been promoted as minister in the Presidency and was the new President's right hand man. In that capacity he appointed a small team of Bolivian political scientists to take forward this idea, consult widely and to produce a project document for the UNDP pilot.

3.4 *"Fighting the Thirty Years War in Bolivia"*

At the beginning of 2002 the team hired by the Presidency presented to donors a detailed project proposal for funding civil society through a donor basket fund. The reception was far from positive. The proposal had become over-elaborate. It had appeared to jump over the more modest pilot phase to a fully-fledged foundation and related think-tank institution. This over-elaboration was seized upon as an excuse to resist a proposal that most donors did not in any case welcome. It became apparent that the Church had been actively lobbying to squash the idea, seeing the foundation as a threat to the proposed social control mechanism. Indeed, while UNDP and DFID had seen the foundation as a simple funding instrument, the way it was now designed could very well be seen as an alternative mechanism. That it had been designed by well-known anti-clericals only confirmed the suspicions of the Church.

What I perceived as an error of over-elaboration in the team's proposal was compounded by the enthusiasm of the Inter-American Development Bank for the proposal. The IDB had grant money set aside to support the monitoring of the PRSP and was anxious to demonstrate its commitment to civil society and participatory development. The "foundation idea" thus provided a ready-made means for disbursing its funds. However the IDBs procedures and regulations made it difficult to support a process approach whereby an idea gradually evolves and is tested over time. Hence, from the IDB perspective, the complex proposal presented to Group Four fully matched its own procedural requirements. The IDB drafted a project document based on the proposal, with a large technical secretariat the costs of which would have eaten up nearly all the IDB proposed grant, therefore leaving little for actually funding civil society activities. I felt I had helped conceive a monster.

Clearly, the scheme as it had now developed, was unworkable. It was apparent that donors were reluctant to support it for three reasons: because it was a bad design, because the Church had lobbied against it and last, perhaps most important, because donors did not wish to surrender their particular, one-to-one relations with specific parts of civil society and generally mediated through their own countries' NGOs. There was a clear antipathy to switching to supporting Bolivian civil society directly rather than through northern NGOs, an important "back home" political constituency for donor governments' aid programmes. Thus, whereas temporary, limited basket funds for support to Bolivian civil society were deemed acceptable, anything more ambitious was considered "very difficult".

In addition to the Church some influential and well-funded civil society organisations in Bolivia were very content with the status quo and the special relationship they had cultivated with particular members of the donor community. Others, in and outside government, as well as in the donor community, were concerned that a single source of international funding for civil society action, however benign and inclusive in its intentions, could lead to unwanted outcomes of excessive control and loss of voice. They argued, with what I felt was some considerable justification, that the prevailing patronage system, while unfair and un-transparent was probably better than any attempted solution.

Meanwhile, the establishment of the social control mechanism proposed by the Church and State as an outcome of the National Dialogue, was running into major difficulties. First, although it had been established by law, there was considerable lack of clarity as to what was expected of it. Was it meant to have oversight of the expenditure of the debt relief or a broader role in identifying the indicators for monitoring the implementation of the Poverty Reduction Strategy? The technical secretariat of the Jubilee movement within the Church appeared at the time interested in building an entire parallel structure to the state with, for example, its own institute of statistics. Donors generally felt uncomfortable with this approach. Nevertheless they agreed that if this is what the Dialogue had established, it was not for them to argue but rather to support nationally owned processes. The second problem resulted from the Church facing a major challenge from within civil society to its hegemony over the decision-making process. This challenge came from the *Comité Enlace*.

The *Comité Enlace*, pleased with its success in bringing livelihood issues into the National Dialogue, grew concerned to maintain and strengthen the voice of its members in civil society's national level monitoring of the Poverty Reduction Strategy. A hotly contested election process for seats on the national directorate of the Mechanism resulted in about half the directors being representatives of the *Comité* and the other half of the Church. There appeared to be no significant representation of those who belonged to neither of these groupings, including major parts of civil society such as indigenous peoples' and women's organisations.

The Jubilee 2000 movement, and the subsequent development of the social control mechanism by the Bolivian Bishops Conference, had received funding support from a number of donors, particularly through the UNDP-managed basket in support of the National Dialogue referred to earlier. The long term source of funds for the Church's involvement in poverty and social justice issues was the German branch of the Catholic NGO, Caritas and, through Caritas, technical assistance and funding from the German government technical cooperation agency, GTZ. The close relationship between the Bolivian Bishops' Conference and the German government was illustrated by a news item in the Bolivian press (*La Razón*) concerning the visit by the Bishops to the Vatican in the week of 8–13 April 2002, followed by a visit to Germany where they had a meeting with the Minister for Development Cooperation.

While the *Comité Enlace* had also used funds from the same initial UNDP source, thereafter it became heavily dependent for support on a single donor, DFID. DFID has been providing financial support to the *Comité* since the start of the PRSP consultation process and is now continuing this within its pro-poor growth objective, as part of its aid to Bolivian government, private sector and civil society efforts to promote greater economic productivity and competitiveness. Although the financial support to the *Comité* was not related to its role in the social control mechanism, *Comité* leaders saw DFID as providing important moral support in the *Comité's* struggles with the Church. The *Comité* was concerned that the technical secretariat, established to support the directorate of the social control mechanism, was in fact made up of the same people as those who had been running Jubilee 2000 with support from GTZ. This secretariat was managing the funds required to

set up and keep the mechanism running and *Comité* people on the directorate claimed they were not getting access to these fund. I was most reluctant to propose to DFID that we provide funds to the *Comité* so that its members on the directorate would be able to travel to mechanism meetings and meet their telephone bills in relation to their social control work. By so doing, two bilateral donors, Germany and the UK, would be each supporting separate factions of the directorate.

The solution appeared to be to establish an autonomous technical secretariat and running costs budget separate from both Church and *Comité*. Having failed with the bigger "foundation" idea, I felt obliged to explore whether a more modest basket fund could be established to support the social control mechanism in a transparent manner with no strings attached. Despite the bilateral community having established strong links of trust and collaboration in the PRSP process of the previous year, there were clearly fault lines developing over this issue, particularly related to different understandings of the role of the Catholic Church in society. In one heated moment, the donor representative from one European country remarked of a colleague from a neighbouring country that he was "fighting the Thirty Years War over again in Bolivia".

At the same time, despite my publicly declared neutrality, I began to realise that from the perspective of those supporting the continued role of the Church in the social control mechanism, I was one of the arch anti-clericals. I had been the author of the original foundation idea *and* DFID was the principal funder of the *Comité Enlace*. My colleagues in Group Four UNDP and the Presidency were tarred with the same brush. On reflection, it was likely (although I had never enquired) that the Presidency, under the new administration, was indeed challenging the political role of the Church. The Presidency was concerned with building and maintaining a long-term programme of reform for Bolivia to become a modern state where old patterns of patronage were replaced by a more transparent and accountable public administration. Like the Army before it, it was time for the Church to return to barracks (or to the cloisters).

It was time also for me to leave Bolivia. I left in the middle of donor discussions as to the feasibility of helping the social control mechanism establish itself as an independent body. If in the short term it were to remain accountable to donors rather than to Bolivians for its budget, it would at least be accountable to a collectivity of donors, rather than just to DFID or Germany. If we could achieve the same model as that for the Defensoria, then the social control mechanism had some chance of survival in the short term. With that breathing space it could possibly develop a way of working that could promote greater accountability of the state to its citizens for the reduction of poverty.

4 Conclusion: learning lessons from practising politics

This section summarises the lessons learnt from my experience, as a member of the donor community, in promoting accountability in Bolivia. I suggest that these lessons point to the need for an explicit recognition that we are political actors and that donor staff need support and training to help them perform more effectively as such. This means they need to be as effective in managing relationships as they are in managing money.

The story told in this paper appears to be one of failure. I plucked an idea from the global international community, brought it back to Bolivia and learnt that my advocacy and alliances were insufficient for the idea to blossom in the way *I* had hoped for. Others took the idea and used it in various ways. The reformers in government saw the foundation as a means to reduce donor interference in local affairs. With their anti-clerical allies among the Bolivian intellectual elite, they also saw it as an opportunity to diminish the political power of the Catholic Church. IDB liked the idea because it was a means to spend money in accordance with its own stated principles of promoting participation in the context of Poverty Reduction Strategies.

It may be that the lively debate around the idea will over time help those in Bolivia to identify other possible solutions that might not otherwise have occurred to them. For example, a donor colleague suggested we could draft and publish a donor community code of ethics.

The rapid turnover of individuals within the local donor community may make difficult the pursuit of such ideas but, on the other hand, they may take and pursue such ideas to their next posting and introduce them to another local donor community. At the same time, those Bolivians in the donor community who liked the idea may continue to work away at it as part of a wider effort to change the current political system of clientelistic relations which donors, through their own behaviour, are helping maintain and reproduce.

The experience taught me some individual lessons as a political actor at the interface of the three sets of relationships of "back home", the "international" and the "local". At first glance the most important lesson would appear to be the very obvious one of needing to invest more time and sustained effort in learning about the local, bearing in mind that recipients do not necessarily encourage donors to learn about them and that, just like donors, they carefully package and edit the information they are prepared to make available.

When I returned from IDS, with the new idea about accountability, I was to begin to learn more about the role of the Catholic Church as a political actor and about the anti-clerical tradition that was opposing this political role. However, it was only when beginning to write this paper, after I had left Bolivia, that I began to explore the literature and interrogate Bolivian friends passing through IDS. While I discovered that not much has been written on the modern role of the Church in Bolivia, I also found that my friends were happy enough to talk about the issue, once I raised it with them. I realised that, as a donor in Bolivia, it was not a subject often discussed in the kind of literature that Bolivian academics prepared for a donor audience. There are probably many other subjects that donors do not become aware of. Donors fund a considerable number of studies and analyses of Bolivian economy, society and politics. It may be that these studies tend to tell the

story of Bolivia in a certain way, sufficient and appropriate for donors in drawing up evidence-based country strategy plans, but staying silent on much of the historical and paradoxical complexity of the local political community.

On the other hand there was only so much "research" that I could have undertaken prior to engaging in pursuit of this idea. I had to seize the moment and furthermore much learning comes from experience and risk-taking. Perhaps the lesson here is rather to be prepared to take risks as caution and reluctance to engage with the unknown are natural tendencies of donor bureaucrats. I was prepared to take more risks than many of my colleagues because I saw myself coming to an end of my career as a donor bureaucrat and I saw my time in Bolivia as experiential. If I had stayed in Bolivia I might have been able to use much of the learning I had gained in this encounter. The rapid turnover of donor staff in any country prejudices the capacity to apply lessons learnt.

It may be that the effort to learn the history, values and conflicts of the receiving country places too high a demand on a donor. In any case she can draw very easily on what she already believes she has learnt and knows from "back home" and from her membership of the global donor community. For their part, recipients may be comfortable with the lack of weight and significance that donors give to the local context, making it easier to use them as pawns in complex struggles of which they stay ignorant.

For these reasons it may be difficult for donors to know what questions to ask, even should they wish to. And without this learning, it makes it almost impossible to consider the impact we make on others and how this affects our capacity to influence political processes. For example, already during and immediately after the National Dialogue, it became intuitively apparent to me that there were those in the local community unhappy with the Church's perceived dominant role in the Dialogue. However, because little was said in public, this information did not impinge on the way I behaved. One exception to the public silence on the issue of the Church was at a meeting of the National Working Group on Participation when a leading Bolivian reformist intellectual pointedly mocked the Church's interest in strengthening the State's accountability to society, enquiring as to whom the Church was accountable, the Holy Ghost? That DFID funded this meeting was probably already giving us an anti-clerical stance in the eyes of informed Bolivians, although at the time this did not occur to me.

Members of local donor communities live self-referential lives. We meet each other many times a week, at formal meetings, birthday parties, and official receptions and at the swimming pool. We increasingly rarely "ground truth" or "reality check" our impressions of what we think is happening in the country. We share our analyses and our knowledge and, as local representatives of the global donor community, assume that on the whole we agree about most things. Our bosses back home encourage us to live in harmony and we are praised for our joined up approaches to poverty reduction and donor-government policy dialogue. Because of this sharing, internal conflict is difficult to admit to and handle, despite it being largely caused by differences between our back-homes that the wider donor community rhetoric does not want to recognise. The causes of

the conflict described in this case study related to different "back home" historically based attitudes towards the role of the Catholic church as well as to variations in the way donors support civil society. While well recognised, it is rarely made explicit that many donor governments put money through back home NGOs in order to nurture the domestic political constituency for aid. I could operate more freely in proposing a new way of funding civil society than could some of my colleagues because of the relative absence of British NGOs in Bolivia.

The story I have told illustrates the tensions arising between "back home" pressures and our loyalty to the global donor community to implement joined up donor approaches to supporting recipient institutions. Our contacts in the recipient community can, and surely do, exploit these tensions to further their own political goals. In this particular story, my donor colleagues and I felt the over-riding priority was to avoid a serious split within the donor community. Like-minded bilateral donors could not be seen to be supporting different sides in a local political fight. The problems with back home would have to be managed one way or another but our own internal harmony as part of the global donor community must be given priority. Once seen to be divided, we believed we would lose much of our capacity to influence recipient political processes.

The Bolivian (and other) recipient governments officially welcome donor unity because of the reduction in transaction costs for hard pressed recipient officials. In theory, basket fund arrangements, and ultimately direct budgetary support associated with policy milestones, give more opportunity to place the recipient "in the driving seat". The recipient sets the agenda and the unified donors sign up behind this. Certainly, this was the view of the reformers in the Bolivian government who considered us more politically manageable when herded into a single group. On the other hand, such a unity among those bringing gifts could have a dangerous edge when linked to a moral purpose. In Bauman's language, our gifts could become particularly oppressive. Therefore we had to be managed carefully through special working groups, such as Group Four, provided only with certain kinds of knowledge. On the other hand, a divided donor community may provide opportunities for other local political actors, in civil society or government, to exploit and take advantage of the complex relations that donors must manage between back home and the international community. The ambivalent attitude of donors and the local community to our funding of local civil society reflects these tensions.

In addition to the pressures discussed so far, staff in donor agencies, engaged in the rights and accountability agenda, are influenced by their own personal history, including the reasons for entering the profession of development practitioner and their interpretation of the history of political conflict back home. As a reflexive practitioner I realised that my commitment to the human rights agenda and my natural sympathy for the *Comité Enlace* may have been to a large extent due to my particular upbringing as a child of a trades union leader from a Protestant, working class background. Just because of that background I may have gone out of my way to think the best of the Catholic Church, as for example compared to someone of Irish

Catholic origin who might have been more familiar with and prepared to tackle what she would have seen as the bad behaviour of a beloved institution.

The donor community uses development discourses that allow its members to dress up the moral, the value-laden and the ideological as "technical". Those we encounter in the local community may actually encourage us to stay in the realm of technical discourse as a means of managing a relationship where they can keep a certain distance from us. On leaving the donor community, so I note a change in my relationship with Bolivian colleagues to one that is more openly value-laden and transparent in its complexity. They are allowing me now to ask questions over matters on which they were silent when I was a donor in their country.

Individuals in a donor community cannot abandon the role given to them by their function. Nevertheless there are some opportunities available to them to manage that role more effectively in support of the stated objectives back home and of the global donor community of poverty reduction and a fairer world. These opportunities are based on Cox's three principles in his theory for managing international relations. Donors must be *normative, pragmatic and reflexive*.

I believe the best normative framework for a donor community is the international human rights agenda. Concerning the story in this present paper, it was the human rights agenda that provided the framework for DFID's emphasis on helping strengthen the state's accountability to its citizens. A normative approach to poverty reduction does not preclude instrumentalist and technical arguments of the kind DFID also used to argue for strengthening the "demand" side of Bolivia's institutional reform programme. Nevertheless, the normative should be constructed so as to have a reflexive core that would and should make donors uncomfortable. If we use the human rights framework as the *unquestioned* justification for our political action, we risk behaving like the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in which our end justifies any means. In our own practice are we living up to the standards that we are expecting from others? If we are not, why not and how can we change? Fortunately, unlike the Church, the global donor community is not a single hierarchical structure and we can and should work on strengthening our accountability to our various stakeholders and thus be more controlled by them. This is where Cox's pragmatism becomes important.

The various pressures on local donor communities make such change painful and slow, full of uncertainties and confusion. It is difficult to learn and to assume a long-term vision in a local donor community. Each individual is operating in a short-time frame related to an average residence of three years in any country and she wants to see herself as having "made a difference". In many instances she is also under pressure to disburse. Nevertheless, asking questions about the complexity of local politics and history is an important step to the greater pragmatism. Looking behind the facade is another. This means asking why different people are seeking relations with us and why others are not. How do they see us? What do they want? It also means systematically leaving the capital city and finding ways and means to listen to the people whom our day to day interlocutors say they represent.

Donors are actors in a process of global social change. No one knows where we are going because we have never been there before. I hope greater self-awareness, even if we do not achieve fully reflexivity, will encourage us to work more comfortably and sensitively with ambiguity, paradox and unanticipated outcomes and that, by this, we become more skilled at playing a more nuanced and genuinely supportive role. Supporting the realisation of rights by poor people will never be a case of "we know what to do and all we have to do is implement".

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