STATES, MARKETS AND SOCIETY – NEW RELATIONSHIPS FOR A NEW DEVELOPMENT ERA

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Strengthening Civil Society in Africa: The Role of Foreign Political Aid

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Abstract Strengthening civil society through the provision of financial resources and technical assistance is viewed by aid donors as an effective means of fostering political pluralism and consolidating fragile democracies in developing countries. Starting from the premise that donors lack a well defined notion of civil society which obscures its conflictual nature, this article considers a range of potential problems that aid donors might encounter in relation to the process of democratic consolidation when supporting civil society organizations. It argues that since donors are not well equipped to handle these types of interventions, they need to avoid undermining the autonomy and legitimacy of recipient organizations: their absorptive capacity is limited, only certain types of organization are able to contribute effectively to democracy promotion, and little is known about their impact. The objective of strengthening civil society may be laudable but since it is a difficult and potentially hazardous area for external intervention, donors should proceed cautiously and with modest expectations about what might be achieved.

Strengthening civil society constitutes an increasingly important element in the array of positive aid measures adopted by aid donors as part of the good government agenda. Although donors have long supported civic associations, often through non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the volume of aid allocated for this purpose has generally been small and it has been peripheral to the main aid policy agenda. The article begins by exploring the rationale behind this shift in emphasis, highlighting the interplay of domestic and international factors. It then surveys the range of meanings attributed to the concept in academic debate and the role of civil society in the process of democratic consolidation. The nature of the relationship between civil society and the state in Africa provides a basis for assessing the role of foreign aid and its potential impact on the internal dynamics of civic associations and their capacity to contribute

to political pluralism and democratic consolidation. The conclusion considers the benefits and limitations of this type of aid in strengthening civil society and the types of interventions and funding mechanisms that hold most promise in this regard.

1 THE RESURGENCE OF CIVIL SOCIETY

The 1990s have seen a major upsurge of interest in the concept of civil society and its relevance to understanding democratic transition and consolidation in the developing world. Although the civic realm was acknowledged to be an important locus of organizational activity, few commentators gave the concept serious attention in view of a general preoccupation with the role of the state and authoritarian forms of government which prevailed in most developing countries. A number of factors help to explain a marked revival of interest in a concept that had received limited attention in scholarly and aid policy circles, especially in Africa.[1]

The experience of democratization in most regions of the developing world starting from the early 1980s was a major factor in shifting academic concerns from the state to societal institutions. It brought with it an interest in the capacity of civic organizations and new social movements to play an active role in undermining authoritarian rule and contributing to the process of democratic consolidation. This was especially important in Eastern Europe where the all-pervasive state had circumscribed an autonomous sphere of associational life, but in which civil society provided the well-spring for the successful democracy movements of the late 1980s, and a source of inspiration for democracy movements elsewhere in the developing world.

A second explanation stems from economic factors which have political implications. Sustained economic decline and mismanagement in much of Africa in the 1980s under the aegis of statist regimes was often accompanied by disengagement from the formal economy, marked by the withdrawal of the peasantry from the market back into subsistence production, outward migration and the spread of the parallel economy characterized by hoarding, currency exchange, smuggling and other illegal activities. This process of disengagement further undermined the legitimacy of the state and weakened its links with societal institutions (Chazan 1988). In some contexts, such as Zambia, Côte D'Ivoire and Benin, the weakening of the state's legitimacy and its control over society gave succour to pro-democracy movements, whereas in countries such as Liberia and Somalia it gave rise to destructive tendencies promoted by ethnic and regional interests competing for political power (Bratton and van de Walle 1992).

Third, the trend towards privatization and the rolling back of the state as an integral element of donor aid policy has focused attention on the scope for the provision of public services through private sector organizations. In Africa, this has invariably centred the capacity of the voluntary sector and local self-help organizations to contribute towards

health and educational provision given the unevenness of formal sector provision, which has further shifted the balance of power and social responsibility away from the state in favour of societal institutions. This is reinforced by expectations on the part of aid donors that NGOs in particular will play an increasingly significant role in service delivery and poverty alleviation programmes.

Fourth, problems encountered in the application of political conditionality as a means of fostering political reform and good government have focused donor attention on the potential for promoting these objectives through positive aid measures (Moore and Robinson 1994). This has included channelling aid to civic associations and organized interest groups with a view to enhancing democratic consolidation and political participation. The success of these types of initiatives in Chile and South Africa has increased donors' confidence in their potential elsewhere. Recipients of such assistance typically include NGOs, business and professional associations (principally lawyers and journalists), trade unions, womens' organizations, and human rights groups. All of these are deemed as constituting key organizations in civil society, but there is little agreement about what is conveyed by the term or the objectives of directing aid to such organizations.

2 CIVIL SOCIETY AND DEMOCRATIC CONSOLIDATION

There are many competing interpretations of civil society, which have their origins in various currents of western political philosophy.[2] In the liberal tradition, civil society is defined as a public realm located between the family and the state, consisting of a plurality of civil associations. The formation of such associations by citizens of their own volition can counteract the potential abuse of power and wealth. They also function to nurture civil and political rights, to advocate popular demands and to promote democratic values. These ideas were challenged by theorists such as Hegel and Marx who espoused an historicist approach, in which civil society is seen as the product of a long process of historical transformation governed by the emergence of a sphere of market relations under capitalism. This notion was developed further by Antonio Gramsci, who treated civil society as an inherently conflictual arena, where civic institutions reproduce and disseminate the hegemonic ideas and values associated with capitalism, but which are subject to contestation.

Clearly these two traditions are associated with very different interpretations of civil society, which have significant operational implications, since most aid donors are inclined towards the liberal interpretation. However, some writers have discerned a degree of convergence between the two traditions centring on the claim that civil society is a distinct public realm located between the family and the state, where individuals join together to pursue collective goals (Bratton 1994: 55-6). Civil society therefore includes a wide array of organizations which have a range of objectives stemming from the shared interests of their members. According to Stepan (1988), it is distinct from political society,

which includes political parties, legislatures and elections, through which organized interests enter into coalitions and compete for political power.

Diamond (1994) has classified civil society organizations into seven categories depending on their goals and membership: (1) economic (productive and commercial associations and networks); (2) cultural (religious, communal and ethnic associations); (3) informational and educational (organizations dedicated to the production and circulation of ideas and information); (4) interest-based (designed to advance the interests of workers, professionals, etc.); (5) developmental (NGOs and self-help groups); (6) issue-oriented (movements for environmental protection, womens' rights, etc.) and (7) civic (aimed at strengthening the political system and imparting democratic values). According to Diamond civil society also encompasses the mass media and other institutions which contribute to the flow of information and ideas (such as universities, publishing houses etc.) but which do not represent associations formed by organized interests. Such a typology resonates with the pluralist approach favoured by most aid donors who conceive civil society as an aggregation of organized interests pursuing a benign and rational political agenda. For example, according to the UNDP:

> Civil society is the sphere in which social movements become organized. The organizations of civil society, which represent many diverse and sometimes contradictory social interests are shaped to fit their social base, constituency, thematic orientations (e.g. environment, gender, human rights) and types of activity. They include church related groups, trade unions, cooperatives, service organizations, community groups and youth organizations, as well as academic institutions and others
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> (Riddell and Bebbington 1995: 23).

For many commentators, the concept only attains practical significance when considered in relation to the state, and more specifically, the process of democratization. As indicated in the previous section, civil society emerged into popular discourse in the late 1980s by virtue of the prominent role played by civic associations in democratic transitions in Latin America and Eastern Europe, especially by those representing the working class, professionals, students and new social movements which, in many instances, joined forces into a 'popular upsurge' against incumbent authoritarian regimes (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986). The pivotal role played by mass protest in political transition in Africa has also received attention. According to Bratton (1994), three broad, primarily urban-based, groups have been important in the African context: the popular classes of self-employed peasants, artizans and vendors; the unionized working class; and the middle classes consisting of entrepreneurs, administrators and professionals. Prompted by a combination of economic malaise and political atrophy, these strata joined forces to challenge the authority and legitimacy of authoritarian regimes across the continent, in many cases giving rise to a process of democratic transition. This process was generally short-lived, culminating

in multi-party elections or in the installation of a caretaker government to negotiate the form of a successor regime. At this point, the institutions of political society assumed a more prominent role in completing the transition from authoritarian rule, centred on political parties competing for power through elections. Having achieved their political objective, civic organizations, especially those representing professionals and the middle class, assumed a more neutral role, taking on responsibility for voter registration, election monitoring and human rights work.

Now that this phase is largely complete, interest is increasingly focusing on the role played by civil society in democratic consolidation, defined as the process whereby democracy attains widespread acceptance as the preferred system for the conduct of political affairs, since this has yet to be achieved in most African countries which have undergone a political transition. According to Diamond (1994: 7):

> Civil society is … a vital instrument for containing the power of democratic governments, checking their potential abuses and violations of the law, and subjecting them to public scrutiny. Indeed, a vibrant civil society is probably more essential for consolidating and maintaining democracy than for initiating it.

This type of approach finds resonance among bilateral aid agencies. According a recent paper published by the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD (1994: 11).

> [B]asic to democratization is the development of a pluralist civil society comprised of a range of institutions and associations which represent diverse interests and provide a counterweight to government. Interaction between the formal political regime and civil society contributes to, and also requires, a responsive government, which is one of the characteristics of a functioning democracy. Supporting pluralism, e.g. the development of autonomous civil associations, professional and interest organizations, is an important step in fostering democratization.

White (1994) argues that the growth of civil society can contribute to democratic governance in four complementary ways: altering the balance of power between state and society to achieve a balanced opposition in favour of the latter; enforcing standards of public morality and performance and improving the accountability of politicians and state officials; transmitting the demands and articulating the interests of organized groups, in the process providing an alternative sphere of representation; and instilling and upholding democratic values. However, as White points out, while civil society holds real potential to influence the process of democratic consolidation, its role and significance in any given context is contingent on the specific character and power of the state and the international political environment.

Civil society organizations in Africa vary considerably in their capacity to contribute to democratic consolidation and, in any case, many

of these are neither equipped nor inclined to perform the various roles outlined by White. Indeed, the task of improving the political system and making it more democratic is assigned by Diamond (1994) to a special category of 'civic' organizations, although a range of organizations might be expected to contribute to this process, including womens' groups, business associations and peasant organizations. At the same time it is important to recognize that not all organized interests will share a common view about the desirability of democratic forms of politics; indeed, the experience of post-colonial rule in Africa suggests that in some circumstances social élites might perceive the reinstallation of a democratic regime as an opportunity to gain special favours from corrupt politicians. Other sections of civil society are likely to feel threatened by the prospect of a civilian regime which commands authority and widespread popular support, especially those engaged in illegal or harmful activities such as smuggling and gun-running. Moreover, there are many groups in African society who have no interest in politics or lack the time and resources to enable them to play an effective role in consensus-building. On the other hand, grassroots activity might act as a constraint on democracy by separating people from meaningful political participation at the national level. Finally, while the growth of associational activity and the proliferation of voluntary organizations can reinforce societal institutions they may undermine state capacity (Chazan 1992). Despite these qualifications, there may exist a particular set of conditions in which a wide range of civil society organizations can take on constitutive and disciplinary roles which are supportive of the process of democratic consolidation.

Bratton (1994) has identified three such conditions – material, organizational and ideological – which support the emergence of active civil societies in the context of political transition by giving them a base which is independent from that of the state. Following the classical Marxist tradition, material conditions are a function of the ability of groups and individuals to accumulate capital and hence are contingent on the growth of an indigenous bourgeoisie. The political affiliations of this class are substantially affected by economic performance and the ability of the government to create the conditions in which independent enterprises can prosper. Moreover, the existence of a middle class is often held to be key to the consolidation of a functioning democracy. The organizational realm refers to intermediate associations in civil society and the organizational linkages between them; this would typically include churches, trade union federations and business associations. The scope for these networks to emerge and establish an independent base is usually contingent on political and historical circumstances; clearly, the ending of authoritarian rule provides them with political space to flourish and develop. Finally, the ideological dimension is a function of the level of discourse which mobilizes critical debate. In Africa, this invariably centres on problems of economic mismanagement and élite corruption, although the rallying cry might take the form of moral condemnation as opposed to popular mobilization depending on the organization which assumes the lead

role in the process of political transition. But it can also take the form of irredentism and fundamentalist movements which have little interest in democracy, as the case of Algeria convincingly demonstrates, which should serve as a reminder of the contradictory roles played by civil society organizations in this regard.

While these three factors are important, access to resources is a critical determinant of the ability of civic organizations to make an effective contribution to democratic consolidation. These take the form of financial as well as organizational and ideological resources. The resources available to civic organizations emerging from a protracted period of authoritarian rule are usually fairly meagre on account of suppression and limited access to outside information. Many organizations are formed during the process of political liberalization and do not have strong social foundations. These will have considerable experience of challenging authoritarian regimes but little knowledge of building democratic government since; mobilizing public opinion against authoritarian rule is far easier than active promotion of democratic values and political participation. The absence of a strong organizational base can limit the legitimacy they possess and the skills base on which they are able to draw. At the same time, while insufficient financial resources and limited technical expertise have posed problems for civil society organizations, the mobilization of funds through membership contributions has proved possible, especially for local credit unions and development groups, but also for trade unions and professional associations, and can enhance their legitimacy and accountability. In this respect Chazan (1992: 290) notes that 'associational autonomy is more central to the vitality of civil societies than the availability of adequate means'. Nevertheless, in situations where the ability to mobilize domestic financial resources is highly circumscribed, outside support can play a vital role in strengthening the capacity of civic organizations to build and sustain democracy in the fragile conditions that many contemporary African societies are facing. External support derives principally from official aid donors, but historically assistance from political foundations, non-governmental organizations, international federations representing business and the professions (for example through the Rotarians and the Lions Clubs), trade unions, and churches have made a significant contribution. Although aid designed to strengthen civil society can be interpreted very broadly, the principal focus of donor efforts in the context of democratic consolidation have been on urban-based organizations in six main categories: business and professional bodies, trade unions, womens' organizations, human rights groups, religious organizations and advocacy-based NGOs.[3]

3 THE ROLE OF FOREIGN AID DONORS

For reasons outlined earlier, strengthening civil society has become a major objective of aid donors in the 1990s, but there are historical precedents. The US government, for example, has funded civic organizations in developing countries in the past, but not always

with the intention of deepening democracy. A prominent objective of American political aid in the 1950s and 1960s was to counter Communist influence in the international trade union movement. Much of this was provided by USAID and channelled through four regional labour institutes of the International Department of the American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) created in the 1960s. US democracy assistance programmes were formalized and expanded in the early 1980s and a variety of organizations assumed responsibility for publicly funded foreign political aid (see Carothers in this volume). The funds allocated for this purpose have increased rapidly, from US$93 million in 1990 to some $400 million in 1994.

Germany has also long been involved in democracy promotion centring on support for political parties, trade unions and civil society organizations. The German Stiftüngen (political foundations) aligned to the three major political parties, were originally founded for internal political education after World War II, but became active in international political projects in the 1950s. After the creation of the German ministry for overseas development in 1961, the government channelled funds to the foundations for 'socio-political education' in developing countries. The bulk of the funds are in the form of grants to party-based organizations, but projects to promote trade unions, cooperatives and other civil society organizations are also important. In 1989, funding from the German development ministry to the political foundations amounted to $156 million; a further $183 million was provided to German non-governmental organizations (Pinto-Duschinsky 1991).

The British government has since adopted a similar model, but on a much smaller scale, in the form of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, which was established in 1992. Its objectives are to build democratic institutions overseas through support for political parties, human rights groups, trade unions, journalists' and lawyers' organizations, womens' groups, and other civil society organizations. Half the budget is allocated to British political parties to support counterparts in other countries, while the remainder is for all-party or no-party projects. In 1992/93 the Foundation provided grants totalling US$1,400,000 for 140 projects in three priority regions: Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Anglophone Africa.

Other bilateral aid donors and private foundations have supported similar activities in the past, but not on such a large scale as the American and German governments, and through a variety of institutional mechanisms.[4] Most support trade union development, either through domestic trade union federations or through multilateral bodies like the ILO and the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). In 1991 support from bilateral agencies for trade union development amounted to US$69 million (out of US$92 million from all sources); almost half of this went to trade unions in Africa,

for a variety of projects spanning education, health and safety, and capacity building (ICFTU 1993). The Danish government is among the larger donors in this area, allocating US$5 million annually to the Danish Trade Union Council for International Development Co-operation. USAID has assisted in the growth and development of business associations in several African countries as part of an initiative to increase the profile of the private sector. Canada and the Netherlands have given positive support to human rights organizations over a number of years, usually with NGOs serving as intermediaries. Another important area of donor intervention is the promotion of womens' rights, especially in the form of legal awareness programmes, but also through more general capacity building and training programmes for womens' organizations.

A large proportion of donor funding for civil society organizations is channelled through NGOs, although it is difficult to distinguish projects designed to strengthen institutional capacity and promote democratic development from those which have more narrowly focused development objectives. Examples of the former are the special budget lines created by the European Commission which are open to NGOs: in 1992 US$8 million was allocated for human rights and democracy initiatives, and a further US$8 million for supporting the democratization process in Chile and Central America, primarily through Latin American and European NGOs.[5] Special funds such as these are less common among the bilateral donors (the Dutch government is an exception in this regard since it has special programmes for human rights, trade unions and the media), although a number of NGO projects funded through conventional co-financing mechanisms have similar objectives. For example, most human rights work supported by CIDA has been undertaken by NGOs, and funds for this have amounted to over US$100 million over the past decade (Riddell and Bebbington 1995: 54).

Some donors concentrate their efforts on fostering a political and legislative environment which is conducive to the work of civil society organizations, by ensuring that freedoms of expression and association are enshrined in law, and pressing for changes in the legislative framework which govern their activities. A number support civic organizations for discrete democracy-building purposes, in the form of election-monitoring, fostering accountability and transparency in government, and strengthening democratic political institutions. Another approach has been to increase the capacity of organized interest groups to assume a more prominent role in policy dialogue and implementation, by improving their research and advocacy skills, strengthening their organizational base and providing them with equipment and office space. In some cases, increasing the involvement of civic organizations in policy dialogue is designed to broaden the consensus behind a particular development strategy, which in much of Africa centres on economic liberalization and an enhanced role for the private sector.

4 THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN POLITICAL AID

Although many donors are rapidly increasing the volume of foreign political aid, the overall objectives of projects designed to strengthen civil society organizations are not always clearly stated. For most donors, assisting the growth and development of such organizations is intrinsically a good thing, since it contributes to political pluralism and draws more people into associational life. The expectation is that a vibrant civil society can facilitate political participation and inculcate democratic values by involving marginalized groups and providing them with access to those holding positions of power, although in Africa this potential is generally latent rather than proven (Chazan 1992). Landell-Mills (1992: 552) identifies four ways in which civil society might be nurtured: (1) by facilitating the dissemination of information; (2) by strengthening the rule of law; (3) by expanding education and the capacity for self-expression and (4) by generating surplus resources to support associational activities without compromising their autonomy. Donor assistance efforts have ranged across all four areas, but in practice most support comes in the form of financial resources and technical assistance.

However, since the overall objectives of foreign political aid are often vague and ill-defined, it is difficult to assess the probable impact of interventions designed to strengthen civil society with any degree of precision. Nevertheless, it is possible to indicate what the probable effects might be in order to highlight problems that might arise if donors persist with a strategy premised on the pluralist notion that civil society organizations are working towards a common goal of strengthening democracy without a conflict of interests. This would enable one to identify the most appropriate mechanisms for such assistance and to avoid interventions which might be counter-productive from the point of view of democratic consolidation or damaging in other respects.

The four categories outlined by White (1994) provide a framework through which these questions can be addressed. The first centres on altering the balance of power between the state and society in favour of the latter through the creation of a dense network of civil society organizations. The availability of foreign aid can provide a powerful stimulus for new organizations to be formed, and can assist in increasing the size and membership of existing organizations. Whether this type of external assistance can contribute to democratic consolidation by increasing the scope for political participation is a function of the types of groups receiving external assistance, the nature of their membership and the degree of popular legitimacy. Simply encouraging the formation of new groups and organizations may generate little visible return unless the assistance is directed towards organizations which have clear objectives and real potential to advance the democracy agenda. In this respect Chazan (1992: 303) cautions that 'while the voluntary sector has helped to undermine statism and to provide a political opening for specific interests and norms, it has yet to establish institutional

foundations and normative principles essential to the consolidation of civil society and hence democracy.'

The dangers inherent in indiscriminate funding of civil society organizations to promote political pluralism are in some ways rather obvious. Different donors may encourage the formation of organizations which are seeking to root themselves in a similar constituency, or support organizations which have conflicting objectives (for example business associations versus trade unions). There is also a danger that the availability of external aid might attract unscrupulous organizations possessing agendas which are antithetical to democracy, either because their leaders are intent on using the organization as a means of furthering personal political objectives, or because the organization in question has goals which serve to undermine political consensus and generate social conflict.

These problems can be mitigated or avoided if donors are willing to coordinate their actions, possibly by focusing their assistance programmes on organizations with which they have a particular affinity or for which relevant expertise is available within their own country. They also focus attention on the importance of rigorous appraisal and informed local knowledge in preference to the rather *ad hoc* procedures utilized by most donors in which aid or diplomatic staff try to spot eligible organizations or filter unsolicited requests in a more reactive mode. This underlines the need for building capacity in donor organizations which may not possess the staff resources or operational structure to enable them to adopt such procedures.[6]

The second category concerns the disciplinary function performed by civil society organizations to ensure that the state is operating along democratic principles. This takes several forms: the introduction and enforcement of mechanisms for holding politicians or public officials accountable for their actions; the protection and extension of civil and political rights; and monitoring state behaviour in relation to human rights. These functions can only be performed by a fairly narrow range of civic organizations with specialist skills, such as lawyers' and journalists' associations, and civil rights groups. The main problem here might be that of too much money being made available to relatively few capable organizations, which could encourage the formation of rival associations, or detract existing organizations from their primary objectives. Heavy reliance on donor funding might also undermine their wider legitimacy and inhibit their sustainability. Landell-Mills (1992: 554) notes in this regard:

> External funding should always take the form of supplementary assistance and ought never to be the main source of what is needed. Members are easy to attract when given access to free resources, but if outside grants become absolutely indispensable, then the sustainability of the organization or institution becomes highly questionable.

Another problem relates to the limited political agendas of these organizations, especially those representing lawyers, which might ultimately be more interested in pursuing the narrow self-interests of their members from the point of view of widening opportunities for monetary gain and enhanced status than democratic goals *per se*. Moreover, as Chazan has observed, some of the urban-based middle-class groups which assumed a prominent role in movements campaigning for the restoration of democratic rule were active in supporting authoritarian rule in the past (Chazan 1992: 303). These problems point to the need to establish channels for facilitating dialogue between donors and potential recipients to identify joint priorities and to enable donors to respond to requests for assistance in line with these priorities rather than with donor-driven policy objectives requiring quick and demonstrable results which could result in inappropriate funding decisions.

The third category of intervention lies in the intermediary role performed by civic organizations between the state and society by transmitting and articulating interest group demands. In this capacity civil society organizations seek to promote greater consultation and popular involvement in the process of policy formulation, especially by disadvantaged groups which have traditionally been denied access to political power. It also embraces more activist forms of engagement with the state, where civic organizations employ a variety of means to provide their constituents with greater 'voice' in order to influence state officials and policy decisions. These can range from advocacy efforts centred on the media and political lobbying through to more confrontational approaches involving demonstrations and other forms of non-violent protest.

Donors have placed particular emphasis on improving the scope for participation by marginalized social groups in the public policy process. At the level of development projects this takes the form of popular participation in decision making and policy implementation and NGOs are seen to play an important role in this regard. This concern extends to policy dialogue on the national plane and donors have sought to enhance the capacity of organized interest groups for research and policy analysis to enable them to make more effective interventions in the policy process. Democratization presents new opportunities for interest groups to gain access to state policy makers and public officials, in order to present their particular viewpoint on policy decisions which are likely to affect their members. Donor assistance in the form of training, technical assistance and equipment is complemented by helping governments set up forums through which formal policy dialogue can take place.

One problem with these types of interventions is that relatively small amounts of foreign funding can have a considerable impact on organizational capacity, and create an imbalance in the power and resources available to different organizations. For example, the proclivity

of the United States to support business associations is in line with its policy stance of promoting free enterprise and a higher level of support to such organizations can give them privileged access to policy makers and heightened visibility in public policy arenas. This can give rise to special pleading on the part of sectional business interests in favour of policies which are of immediate short-term benefit to their members but potentially harmful to others.

Second, strengthening the capacity of private sector lobby groups and other influential civic organizations for policy dialogue often carries with it an implicit ideological agenda. Efforts to involve more organized interests in the policy process are frequently directed towards creating a more active consensus in favour of economic reform, by giving the potential beneficiaries of reform a greater stake in policy outcomes, but also by mitigating potential opposition from the losers of reform, or at least channelling active opposition into passive acceptance. This is obviously desirable from the point of view of the proponents and funders of structural adjustment programmes since it increases the likelihood of political sustainability, but it might squeeze out room for alternative perspectives and feedback on the adverse impact of economic reform unless provision is made for this. It might also conflict with the ambitions of other donors to promote a redistributive agenda centred on increasing the access of the poor and politically disenfranchised groups to the policy process. Hence, groups which resist or criticize the policy agenda of the government might find themselves marginalized or deliberately sidelined as a result of a desire among donors to strengthen supporters of the prevailing agenda.

A third problem is the possibility of overloading the capacity of government policy-makers to accommodate interest group pressure without damaging the technical consistency of policy initiatives. Most policy makers in adjusting economies in Africa are already under serious pressure of work and those concerned with economic policy spend a considerable amount of time attending to donor requirements and policy conditions; they are often not in a position to respond sympathetically even if they are well disposed to increased policy dialogue. A more serious prospect is that of gridlock where sustained interest group pressure fosters inertia and undermines the capacity of the government to pursue a sustained development strategy (Migdal 1988). This is unlikely in most African contexts since organized interests are neither sufficiently well organized or numerous to pose a serious threat to state policy making capacity, but it does highlight the need to create some degree of insulation for key policy makers balanced by the creation of formal channels for policy dialogue.

The fourth category of donor intervention concerns the constitutive role performed by civil society organizations, which takes a number of different forms: increasing the legitimacy of the political system by instilling and upholding democratic values through civic education programmes; providing people with experience of participating

in democratic debate within these organizations; and in recruiting and training new political leaders. This is a less contentious area for donor intervention, since these types of activities have been a historic function of civic organizations in democratic societies. Many donors are supporting civic education programmes, voter registration drives and election monitoring. Such interventions have helped to ensure that elections have been reasonably free and fair, but the longer term impact of civic education programmes are more difficult to assess. The problem might come with indiscriminate funding of organizations which do not have a strong base of legitimacy or developed membership, or which do not possess the technical skills and technical expertise to enable them to carry out such functions. Some groups might be formed in response to the availability of donor funding and to further individual political agendas which again highlights the importance of careful appraisal and the need for a thorough understanding of the composition of civil society in the countries in question.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Many of the problems identified in the previous section are latent and there is as yet insufficient documented evidence to provide a clear picture on the impact of donor interventions designed to strengthen civil society organizations. Some of these problems have been encountered by donors in directly funding development NGOs, especially those concerning a possible erosion of independence and autonomy, and there may be lessons which are of relevance here (Riddell and Bebbington 1995).

There are, of course, positive reasons why supporting civil society organizations is a laudable objective for aid donors, if they are able to make a more effective contribution to the process of democratic consolidation as a result of external assistance. But there are also a number of caveats. These fall into two groups: following on from the previous section, there are a series of operational concerns relating to the funding relationship, but there are also a set of more fundamental questions stemming from the premises on which donor interventions in this area are founded.

As was argued earlier, most donors adhere to a definition of civil society steeped in the liberal political tradition which holds that civic associations occupy a public domain located between the family and the state, in which there is a shared consensus on democratic norms and respect for political pluralism. This approach tends to obscure conflicts between different categories of civic associations and fails to give adequate recognition to the existence of divisive social forces which are averse to democracy, but nevertheless form part of 'civil' society. Hence interventions founded on the notion that merely altering the balance between the state and civil society in favour of the latter in some quantitative sense will contribute to democratic consolidation, overlook potentially destructive elements in civil society which make such interventions both difficult and hazardous. One

might therefore conclude that most donors, as presently constituted, are poorly-equipped to intervene directly without either exacerbating such tendencies or creating imbalances of power between different organizations. But this ignores the fact that most donors have already embarked on this path, and that some have amassed considerable experience. Given this scenario, there are a series of operational issues that merit attention, which can help to ensure that donors proceed cautiously with modest expectations of what might be achieved in view of the limitations and potential problems sketched out earlier.

First, many of the organizations that donors would like to support are small and fairly new. Large quantities of aid resources in relation to their actual requirements could swamp these organizations before they are in a position to map out their objectives, build up an independent membership and gain wider legitimacy. At the same time aid interventions directed towards civil society strengthening are unlikely to be very substantial, either in terms of the size of projects funded or in terms of their share of official development assistance, and pressure on donors to allocate increased levels of resources to meet overall good government policy objectives may induce recipient organizations to accept more funds than they require. Donor coordination is clearly essential when the supply of funding exceeds the requirements of recipient organizations in order to avoid a situation where there is competition for the more attractive counterparts or where unscrupulous organizations can gain access to these funds.

Second, it takes time for these activities to bear fruit, and the development of a mature and robust set of civil society organizations that are able to perform the various roles set out above can be an extremely protracted process. External funding can assist in this process and perhaps give it a boost, but it would be folly to presume that civil societies can be artificially induced when the material, organizational and ideological conditions prevailing in many African countries undergoing political transition are not conducive to the rapid growth of civil society. The availability of material resources is certainly important, but it may not be central to building up a robust civil society, since in situations where associational life has long been suppressed, building organizational capacity and developing a distinctive ideological stance are essential prerequisites for enabling civil society organizations to contribute effectively to the process of democratic consolidation.

Third, it is difficult to assess the contribution made by civil society organizations given the absence of an established framework for evaluation. By their very nature, many organizations may not have developed internal procedures for documenting their work or assessing their impact. Insistence by donors on rigorous monitoring procedures could lead to the imposition of inappropriate practices which might divert energy away from the main goals of the organization and undermine its effectiveness. At the same time it will be necessary for donors to account for the use of these funds, and evaluation can in

turn induce greater accountability from recipient organizations, but this should not be at the expense of internal accountability to their members.

This last caveat raises the question of the most appropriate mechanism for channelling funds and other resources to civil society organizations. Donors employ a variety of mechanisms for this purpose, ranging from using intermediaries such as NGOs and political foundations, through to direct funding from overseas mission funds. NGOs are a tried and tested intermediary for working with local membership organizations and advocacy groups, but have less experience in civic and political education, and in supporting specialized interest groups such as trade unions and business associations. Political foundations often have this type of expertise, but they have the disadvantage of being perceived as partisan or as a potential threat by state authorities. Donors usually channel trade union funding through domestic trade union bodies which have the links and the expertise but which often lack an in-country presence. Using mission funds to provide support in response to locally generated requests is favoured by some donors but has its limitations, especially if there is not good donor coordination. These various mechanisms will continue to be used by donors, but there are other mechanisms and approaches which have not been explored and which could help to obviate some of the potential problems highlighted earlier.

For example, it may be more productive for donors to specialize in certain categories of organization with whom they have a certain familiarity or which have a particular expertise. Linking up or twinning domestic organizations with counterparts in developing countries, or between organizations from the same region is a good route to follow since there is much relevant experience that can be shared and they have skills which donors do not possess. Creating forums through which recipient organizations can exert some degree of influence over the terms on which the support is provided can increase the legitimacy of external funding and ensure that it corresponds to locally defined needs.

On balance, while democracy promotion may be a laudable objective in its own right, there are a number of potential pitfalls confronting donors who are seeking to expand political aid programmes. Some indication of the sorts of problems that might arise has been given along with suggestions about action that could be taken to mitigate these. Although positive support for strengthening civil society organizations has many advantages over political conditionality as a means of advancing good government objectives, donors will need to be realistic about the volume of assistance that can channelled through this mechanism since civil society organizations cannot absorb large quantities of funding and it takes time for the results to become apparent. Donor efforts in this field will therefore need to proceed in a cautious and in well-informed manner in order to avoid forcing the agenda at a pace that would run counter to the twin objectives of democratic consolidation and promoting a pluralistic political culture in developing countries.

NOTES

1 Important exceptions were Bayart (1986) and various essays in Rothchild and Chazan (1988).
2 For a comprehensive review see Keane (1988) and Bobbio (1988).
3 NGOs represent only one category within the panoply of organizations supported by donors for furthering democratic goals, and it is primarily advocacy-based organizations rather than development NGOs engaged in service delivery which perform this role. It is also doubtful whether NGOs actually form part of civil society, since they are generally function as intermediaries between donors and civil society organizations, as conduits of resources and information. See Frantz (1987) and Fowler (1991).
4 The Ford Foundation has played a very important role in this regard, having provided grants to a range of civil society organizations in developing countries over a number of years.
5 In 1992 a new budget line of US$0.8 million was established to support local authorities, trade unions and grassroots organizations, but this is small in comparison with other budget lines open to NGOs.
6 Riddell and Bebbington (1995: 53) make a similar point in the context of donor funding for southern NGOs, in arguing that effective support 'requires local knowledge and an in-country presence over an extended period'.

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