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Eleven Recommendations for Working on Empowerment and Accountability in Fragile, Conflict or Violence-Affected Settings

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Drawing on the experiences and insights of the Action for Empowerment and Accountability (A4EA) programme, gained from supporting local partners in Egypt, Mozambique, Myanmar, Nigeria and Pakistan, we present eleven key messages about how to work in contexts with deeply circumscribed spaces.

There has been growing concern about the challenges faced by donors and development organisations working in contexts that are increasingly fragile, highly volatile and insecure. In such conditions, the first instinct of many external development actors might be to simply withdraw their staff, funding, or operations from the area. Such a decision could be explained, for example, by citing foreign policy or security considerations or by concern for the implications of increasingly repressive measures affecting these actors and their partners. But such a strategy could result in vital support not being provided for empowerment and accountability activities, precisely when local stakeholders say they need it most. If Western donors choose to continue

to support local actors in their work on empowerment and accountability, working under the radar is an approach which external actors and local partners should consider in order to adapt to the exigencies of fragile contexts. It is essential to understand that the term 'working under the radar' in this context should not be interpreted as engaging in any unlawful or clandestine activity. Rather, it is about adapting to the conditions experienced by local actors in fragile contexts. The eleven recommendations below summarise what the A4EA programme has learnt about framing and representation, devising strategies of engagement, and understanding and appraising change, when working in fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings.

"Withdrawing... from fragile, highly volatile and insecure contexts could result in vital support not being provided precisely when local stakeholders... need it most."

1. Think carefully about appropriate language

Language such as 'empowerment and accountability', 'citizen collective action' and 'human rights' might have positive connotations in Western academic, media and policy circles, but in many parts of the world, these phrases are imbued with less positive overtones. For example, 'empowerment' simply being about earning an income; 'accountability' being perceived as meddling in politics; and the language of 'rights' conjuring images of powerful actors arbitrarily and selectively endorsing or condemning agendas according to their own personal preferences.

In the A4EA programme, it has been helpful in some instances to use language that is less politically charged to convey similar messages; for example, to talk about 'working together' instead of 'collective action', or 'creating positive change in people's lives' instead of 'empowerment'. It has also helped to be as specific as possible about what is being advanced; for example, to speak specifically about women's bodily integrity in campaigns against sexual harassment in Egypt.

2. Forgo the logo and publicity as it could undermine local partners

Western donors are under pressure to show that taxpayers' money earmarked for development is going to good causes and contributing to positive change. One way to demonstrate this is by increasing the visibility of this work and its impact through, for example, the use of donor logos; social media campaigns using hashtags, photos or videos; press releases; and often the physical presence of donors (e.g. visits from a senior politician or another representative).

However, this visibility can seriously undermine local partners, who are often struggling to survive on at least two fronts: their governments may be suspicious of any foreign funding that is not being channelled directly through them, and, other members of civil society may view foreign funding as a form of soft power being used to advance a Western agenda.

In such contexts, more backstage support by donors may not only be wise, but also necessary to avoid a backlash. In one highly authoritarian context in which A4EA was working, a local actor confided that they had declined one multilateral agency's offer of support on account of the agency's insistence that its logo should feature on their banner. Such visibility on the part of an external donor would have opened a Pandora's Box for that local actor.

Donors can remain accountable to their taxpayers by using communication strategies that do not put local partners at risk. Some donors, such as

Characteristics of fragile, conflict and violence-affected settings

- **High levels of political volatility:**
  Decisions, policies, and decrees can be issued, annulled, or revised in a manner that seems erratic or random.

- **Lack of clarity around who or what shapes policy in these settings:**
  It is difficult to develop clear theories of change or pursue granular advocacy plans, since policy-influencing pathways are often unpredictable or opaque.

- **Unpredictable red lines when it comes to campaigning for social justice:**
  The arbitrary nature of authority and how it is being exercised makes it difficult for local actors mobilising for empowerment, accountability or other social justice causes to know where the red lines, which should not be crossed, lie.
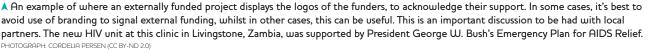
- **Security governance assumes centre stage in people's lives:**
  This applies as much to authoritarian contexts, in which the role of the security apparatus in governing is excessive, as it does to contexts in which a wide array of state and non-state actors are providing or withholding functional security.

- **High risks to personal safety:**
  Despite the glaring difference between highly centralised authoritarian regimes and those where security governance is being contested, the outcome for non-state actors engaging in collective action is the same: high risks to personal safety and wellbeing and a conspicuous absence of coherent and consistent law enforcement.

△ An example of where an externally funded project displays the logos of the funders, to acknowledge their support. In some cases, it's best to avoid use of branding to signal external funding, whilst in other cases, this can be useful. This is an important discussion to be had with local partners. The new HIV unit at this clinic in Livingstone, Zambia, was supported by President George W. Bush's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief.
PHOTOGRAPH: CORDELIA PERSEN (CC BY-ND 2.0)

DFID, have developed branding guidelines which provide explicit advice on when to use their branding, and when it can be used minimally or not at all if it has the potential to put local partners at risk.

In some cases, even local partners who were associated with an international name (e.g. members of an international federation) decided it was safer not to have their international partners' branding associated with the work being done, because of increasing antipathy towards any name associated with the West. They chose instead to only associate the work with their local organisation.

It is important not to assume that the withholding of external actor logos is a protective measure in every situation. In some contexts, it is a welcome signal to power-holders that local partners are well connected. Local partners are best positioned to advise on when to withhold or display logos.

3. Do not confuse having a low profile with clandestine information-gathering

If avoiding high visibility involves greater delegation to local partners, it is important not to ask them to share highly sensitive information about their contexts, as this might give the impression that they are engaging in clandestine and dubious information-gathering exercises. In many countries, local activists who take part in poverty reduction efforts can still be prosecuted under national espionage laws if they are seen to be sharing information which touches upon matters of national security.

If local partners only share their research with an external actor, and are not disseminating it locally, authoritarian governments might interpret their research activity as being for other, more clandestine, purposes, rather than for the benefit of local people. One practical suggestion is to avoid asking partners to complete country context

review reports that require them to share highly sensitive information or analysis, which may increase the risk of their being seen as traitors.

4. Put local partners at the heart of the risk analysis process

Now that external actors, such as funders, development organisations or research institutes who commission work from local partners in fragile and insecure environments, have increased duty-of-care responsibilities, they are increasingly calling on specialised companies to provide risk analysis and to recommend security precautions. While such information is useful, the risk assessment should also be informed by local partners' own risk analysis. Those on the ground are often very well positioned to provide information about the situation. Taking the 'risk pulse' should be done regularly and not just at the beginning, in the middle and at the end of a programme, as red lines are constantly moving. The reconfiguration of power-holders happens in an unpredictable way and some types of risks subside while others intensify. Without such locally informed and constant risk-checking, external actors might act on the basis of assumptions premised on outdated information. For example, because an event for the A4EA programme was held in a public space in one focus country, it was assumed that it would be safe to hold a similar meeting a year later in the same venue. However, by the day of the event, this public space had become so intensely surveyed by informants, that it was risky for partners to attend. With earlier input from local partners, this could have been avoided.

5. Take advantage of opportunities to support work on safe issues that contributes indirectly to empowerment and accountability

Even in highly authoritarian and precarious settings where authorities display a low threshold of tolerance for public contestation, there are issues on which it is possible to work while advancing accountability. In all five fragile and/or authoritarian contexts in which the A4EA programme has been implemented, collective mobilisation around women's rights has provided a pathway through which to raise grievances that go beyond the specific issue. For example, work to raise awareness about sexual harassment in Egypt's public hospitals

has led to wider debate about how to protect staff and patients. In Nigeria, the Bring Back Our Girls movement shifted its campaigning from an exclusive focus on the return of the kidnapped Chibok girls to broader questions about the safety of girls at school in certain parts of the country. In Pakistan, work around women's political representation paved the way for exposing areas of the political system where greater transparency and accountability are needed.

In other words, in contexts where authorities are sensitive about the possibility that Western actors might be challenging their sovereignty while claiming to promote democracy and uphold human rights, there are many other ways of supporting empowerment and accountability. While they may seem indirect, they are likely to have positive spillover effects.

6. Support actors embedded in coalitions rather than those acting alone

In contexts where policy-influencing pathways are highly precarious and volatile, it may be better to support coalitions of actors rather than a single actor, who might be more vulnerable to targeting by the authorities. In all of the successful cases studied as part of A4EA, actors worked through loosely connected networks or strong cohesive coalitions in order to ensure survival. For example, the Bring Back Our Girls campaign had created a strong coalition so they could call on important people and connections to withstand the attacks from both state and non-state opponents.

7. Think of a 'multitude of smalls'

Development assistance has witnessed a clear shift towards supporting initiatives that can be scaled up. Vertical scaling is considered a sign of greater outreach, influence and impact. For those engaged in collective action, too, convention has it that the larger the numbers, the greater the visibility, and the more likely it is that power-holders will take them seriously. However, in highly fragile contexts, there are instances in which going to scale represents a major survival risk, as higher visibility makes it easier for actors and initiatives to be targeted. Also scaling up may be seen by the authorities as threatening. In such settings, actors may

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survive by staying small in a number of places, yet coordinating their work. Because of this, external actors need to be willing to support a multitude of small-scale initiatives. There is a clear trade-off here: supporting a multitude of small initiatives is not the most economical strategy when it comes to financial management or monitoring and evaluation. On the other hand, if it means the very survival and sustainability of meaningful local action, it may be worthwhile.

8. Develop indicators of success that are appropriate to fragile contexts

There has been a clear change of direction amongst those providing or working in international development assistance, towards seeing policy shifts as the key indicator of success. Policy successes are often interpreted as signalling changes in governance, policymakers' practices and power dynamics – changes that will favour the most vulnerable. However, in fragile contexts, this may be problematic.

Firstly, in many fragile contexts, authority is fragmented, meaning that even if a policy change were to happen, it does not necessarily mean that it would be enforceable, owing to the plurality of power-holders and their different agendas.

Secondly, for local actors to venture into mobilising for influence at a high level may be political suicide. In contexts where space is deeply circumscribed and there is a high risk of violence, survival in itself should be taken as a proxy for success. In other contexts, success may be best seen in terms of small-scale gains in people's ability to demand their rights from local power-holders, or their ability to organise around interests and even just the act of voicing their grievances in a collective safe space. Consequently, the starting point of external actors should be to reflect with local partners on what success looks like, a question that is likely to be reconfigured across the duration of the engagement, given the unpredictability of the situation on the ground.

9. Be prepared to reconsider the content of the action plan

One of the common indicators of success in development programmes is that local partners are held to account for adherence to timelines and action plans. While this is a reasonable expectation in stable contexts, in highly fragile contexts this is harder to adhere to. Space for social and political engagement is continually changing, expanding in one realm, while closing in on another. For example, in Mozambique, while the policy-influencing space for *Forum Mulher*, a national women's rights network became increasingly circumscribed, the opportunities for working with constituencies at a rural level were fairly open at one stage. As the political situation changed over the course of our A4EA work, rural outreach presented a security hazard, while engaging with centrally based policymakers did not pose the same safety risks. The situation is ever-changing and necessitates that activities and timelines are modified according to how the red lines seem to shift (both politically and in terms of security).

10. Recognise that sunshine is not always the best disinfectant

Naming and shaming is a valued and recognised approach for exposing abuses of power. While this is important for accountability, it can have unintended consequences for vulnerable groups, who could experience retaliation as a result of weak law enforcement or social norms that condone discrimination against these groups. For example, in Egypt, there is a social stigma associated with women who choose a career in nursing, as they are perceived to be in positions where they might be asked for 'non-medical services' (of a sexual nature). The anti-sexual-harassment unit's campaigns with hospitals became aware that work on holding doctors and patients to account over the sexual harassment of nurses needed to be done in such a manner that does not increase the vulnerability of nurses to society's prejudices. Supporting social justice, accountability and the championing of rights without exposing vulnerable groups to further societal repression is pertinent to all contexts, but especially so in fragile ones.

11. Use a differentiated approach when engaging with power-holders

Despite a rich body of work on the heterogeneity of the state and the complexity of governance systems and structures, there is still a temptation amongst some external

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actors to speak of 'state security' as a single, all-powerful entity, and one that is in direct opposition to anyone working towards empowerment and accountability. This is understandable, given that the role of the security apparatus in many authoritarian and fragile contexts is focused on defending and protecting the *status quo* and the power-holders that control it. However, the reality on the ground, where authority is fragmented and the main power-holder could be the local militia, is much more complex. In Myanmar as in Nigeria, local actors often find they need to navigate different layers, levels and functions of security power-holders. While at the national level, the state security apparatus may be seen as 'the oppressor', at the local level, it may in fact provide safe passage to dangerous areas controlled by non-state actors; for example, by supplying information on which roads are safe and giving the latest security update in particular communities. This was essential for A4EA's work with Bring Back Our Girls, as we needed to be able to access survivors of sexual violence in their local communities. In these contexts, the state is neither 'friend' nor 'foe' and the relationship with it is a negotiated one. Local partners linking up with state actors should not be viewed either as lackeys or as opponents of the state.

Caveat

As with all messages emanating from experiences that are context- and time-bound, these recommendations are not to be read as 'rules'. For every message above, there will be exceptions and examples to suggest other courses of action may be best suited to the local context. They represent, however, recurring themes that have been identified during the first phase of the A4EA programme (2017–2019) as particularly pertinent for discussion when offering financial and technical support to local partners working in highly unpredictable and fragile contexts.

Further reading

Christie, A. and Green, D. (2019) *The Case for an Adaptive Approach to Empowerment and Accountability Programming in Fragile Settings*, Synthesis Report, Brighton: Itad and Oxfam in association with IDS

Dayil, P.B. (2018) *Seeking Accountability, Nurturing Empowerment: Lessons from the BBOG's Movement in Nigeria*, Utafiti Sera Research Briefing Series, Nairobi: Partnership for African Social and Governance Research (PASGR)

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