

Preface

When working in a variety of contexts, the Swiss approach is to work from the bottom up, starting at the local level and linking strategically to the intermediate or nation levels. The local level is particularly important, because it is where the exchange between political actors, policymakers and the citizens is potentially the most intensive. At least that is what we believe. Our work revolves around the local. We believe that our actions lead to better governance, i.e. to more transparency, higher levels of accountability and effectiveness. We believe that this can be achieved with more participation and better, institutionalised inclusion.

But is all of this true? SDC being a learning organisation, which supports a learning-by-doing and flexible implementation approach, we started a journey to find out. We ask ourselves what factors are influencing local governance performance at the local level. We try to find out how to reach a solid understanding of the political landscape, by means of analysis and interaction. We want to better understand the role and motivations of diverse actors and how to best engage with these. We search for the best ways to support policymaking in the interest of the citizens and without imposing. And we

inquire in what ways fragile contexts need a different approach than more stable ones.

One of the current foci in the SDC learning journey is about effective civic engagement. Joint reflections suggest that we need to better capture the meanings and practices of active citizenship in different contexts and to find ways of engaging more with genuine, legitimate citizen action. We are also further exploring what it means to work with so far less targeted (or hidden) political actors who are key to social change. The more fragile the context, the more hidden actors, informal structures and mechanisms are at play and the better we need to understand the underlying currents and how to mitigate associated risks.

In engaging with IDS on these issues, SDC has started on a journey beyond the boundaries imposed by our own perception and practice, for our own use and for the use of others like us, but ultimately for the use of those we work for. We think we have a collection of highly relevant and timely contributions in this *IDS Bulletin*, which will take us on that journey. What we make of them is up to all of us.

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