

# Africa after the Africa Commission:

What priorities for the German G8?



## Opinion

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# Civic engagement and accountability

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‘Donors need to invest diplomatic weight in directly facilitating civic engagement with the state, as opposed to divesting all responsibility in intermediaries such as NGOs.’

These Opinions have been written for a high level policy forum bringing together senior DFID and NGO staff, MPs, private sector representatives, Africanists, development academics, and key journalists for discussion on the future of Africa in the run-up to the G8 meeting in Germany (6-8 June). The Forum was held on May 2nd, 2007 in London.

The G8 Action Plan and the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness say little about ‘demand-side’ pressure for governance reform and poverty reduction through civic engagement. This may respect the principle of national ownership, but is not accountability to citizens essential for national ownership to be meaningful? If so, to what extent can donors be expected to support it?

Rights-based approaches have encouraged civil society to play a much more active role in policy advocacy, including through national networks and coalitions such as the Malawi Economic Justice Network, as well as international alliances such as the Global Call to Action against Poverty (GCAP).

The Domestic Election Observation Group in Nigeria is a powerful illustration of the role of citizens as agents of accountability. This mobilised some 50,000 trained election observers across the country. It highlighted widespread irregularities, in spite of donor support to the Independent National Election Commission (INEC).

Both the Africa Commission and the Progress Report on the G8 Action Plan stress the importance of broadening participation and strengthening institutions that improve accountability, including parliaments, local authorities, the media, and the justice system.

DFID’s third White Paper on international development, *‘Making Governance Work for*

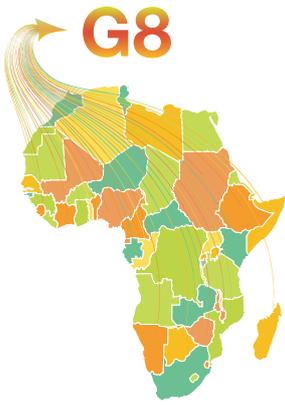
*the poor*’ (2006) also highlights the role of citizens and civil society in helping to keep the state honest. This partly responds to criticism that the closed nature of donor – government dialogue around PRBS has restricted opportunities for civic engagement.<sup>1</sup>

But donors are also not as well coordinated in supporting civil society as they are in supporting developing country governments.<sup>2</sup> In particular, there is uncertainty over the role of politics and the degree to which donors should engage in it.

The 2006 White Paper is clear about the importance of politics, as the often informal processes by which states, leaders and citizens relate to each other to make change happen.

A focus on politics as the ‘interaction of interest groups’ is a potentially radical departure from traditional governance reform. The latter is often structured to address imperfections in formal systems, or to deal with the ‘rotten apples in the barrel’.<sup>3</sup> Instead donors such as DFID are increasingly interested in ‘good enough governance’ – in working with, rather than against, the grain of ‘neo-patrimonial’ political systems. In some cases, these have been able to deliver spectacular gains in poverty reduction.<sup>4</sup>

However, DFID’s White Paper stops short of examining the implications of a focus on politics – especially in fragile states where the



rules defining citizenship may be poorly defined/enforced, and where many of the most marginal (or indeed influential) actors may operate outside the constitution.

Donors are not well equipped to engage in politics. As it is, donor support to civil society faces a difficult balancing act between the need to safeguard relations with government on the one hand and not to undermine CSO advocacy on the other. Political risk is in fact encouraging donors to operate at arms' length from civil society – through intermediary NGOs and local foundations.

An interest in working politically is also difficult to reconcile with efforts to harmonise donor support to civil society, including pooled funding. Not all donors are willing to work with social movements or other potentially politicised actors. Equally, not all donors are sufficiently flexible in their funding arrangements to minimise transaction costs for civil society partners – preventing work with more marginal citizens groups, or with loosely affiliated networks with minimal administrative capacity.

The essential question is whether donors should seek to promote accountability by simply enhancing the rules of the game for civic engagement (e.g. support to civic education, conflict resolution and political party development), or by backing specific interest groups to achieve particular policy outcomes.

This raises difficult questions over the extent to which donors should be seen as actors in otherwise endogenous political processes. But there are perhaps three main things that donors will need to do if they do want to work through the use of interest groups:

- Understand better what 'voice' constitutes in fragile-state, neo-patrimonial settings. This including how rights and responsibilities are shaped and exercised through informal channels, and the extent to which this reinforces or undermines the development of formal accountability mechanisms such as parliaments.
- Relax administrative rules to allow a more diverse set of influential actors to access funding and facilitation. This is especially important for mechanisms such as basket funds, where civil society recipients may be subject to the reporting demands of more than one donor.
- Be prepared to invest diplomatic weight in directly facilitating civic engagement with the state, as opposed to divesting all responsibility in intermediaries such as INGOs.

This does not need to be seen as undermining national ownership, if national ownership is more than the state.

### Notes and resources

1. CARE and Actionaid International (2006) *Where to now? Changing Relations between DFID, Recipient Governments and NGOs in Malawi, Tanzania and Uganda*.
2. UK Public Accounts Committee (2007)
3. Research Programme Consortium (RPC), *Power, Politics and the State: How to Develop Political Institutions that Work for the Poor*.
4. Khan, M. (2005) 'Markets, States and Democracy: Patron-Client Networks and the Case for Democracy in Developing Countries', *Democratization*, Vol.12, No.5.

For further information on the event, including podcast, video and further downloadable materials, visit the conference websites at:

[www.ids.ac.uk/ids/aboutids/events/dsa\\_policy\\_forum.html](http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/aboutids/events/dsa_policy_forum.html)  
[www.odi.org.uk/events/G8\\_07/](http://www.odi.org.uk/events/G8_07/)

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