

Improving democratic governance in conflict-affected countries

Partners for Democratic Change International and the Initiative for Peacebuilding

PDCI is working in partnership with peacebuilding organisations under the “Initiative for Peacebuilding (IfB),” a European Commission supported project that develops international knowledge in the field of conflict prevention and peacebuilding to ensure that all stakeholders can access independent analysis in order to facilitate better informed policy decisions¹. One of the key questions explored by this partnership is how to improve citizen participation in political decision-making in conflict-prone and conflict-affected contexts. It encompasses analysis of how citizens understand governance processes and institutions and how they can have greater influence on them. Drawing lessons from case study research in four countries (Georgia, Pakistan, Angola and DRC), the work identifies the ways and means by which a culture of genuine political participation can be built, and how this endeavour can best be supported by external actors. The research also looks at obstacles, such as impunity and the exclusion of certain population groups, which impede the emergence of stronger state-citizen relations and better governance more broadly.

Following on from the research for the case study in Javakheti, Georgia, PDCI and Partners-Georgia are currently implementing a project to increase citizen participation and improve democratic governance in this divided and isolated region. The process will stimulate cross-sector cooperation, facilitate solving community issues through the participation of local people and build centre-regional partnerships through, for example, cooperative planning techniques and knowledge exchange between national and local (Javakheti) CSOs. The project is also providing support to networks of local civil society organisations to facilitate their participation in structured political consultations with local authorities.

The nature of governance in conflict-affected countries

The analysis produced under the Initiative for Peacebuilding in these four countries, sheds light on the nature of governance in conflict affected countries. By focusing attention on the relationship between state and society, the goal is to assist external agencies and affected

¹ (1)The IfP partners collaborating in this work are The Netherlands Institute of International Relations ‘Clingendael’, European Peacebuilding Liaison Office (EPLO), La Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior (FRIDE), International Center for Transitional Justice (ICTJ), International Alert (IA) and Partners for Democratic Change International (PDCI). The work is coordinated by IA. This document is based on the country reports and on the synthesis report “Society in Statebuilding” by Edward Bell, 2009

societies to generate a new political culture of public participation and of accountable governance.

Donor agencies are becoming increasingly aware that the efficacy of development assistance is affected by the relationship between ‘**state**’ and ‘**society**’ and the underlying political culture. There are, however, inherent tensions between this growing awareness at the theoretical level, and the practice. While the purpose of interventions is to create the institutional and societal preconditions for a state that recognizes equal rights and ensures equal opportunities, resistance at the central state level and practical compromises made in the implementation process may sustain inequity. Sovereign states may see ‘good governance’ as an externally-driven political agenda that infringes upon principles of non-interference. Donors may hesitate to tackle it because to do so might generate accusations of neo-colonialism. Also, since democratisation processes entail changes in the nature and distribution of political power, they may themselves drive instability and violent conflict, undermining in the short to medium term the very objectives of peaceful development that are being pursued. Sometimes, external agencies abandon explicit democratic governance priorities in the name of country (i.e. state) ‘ownership’ of development processes and in favour of technocratic approaches to particular sectors and tasks.

In some places, external actors engage heavily in an explicitly political arena by giving political and substantial financial support to **elections**. Very often the initial outcomes are encouraging and worthy of the headlines announced around the world. As the IfB study on the DRCs South Kivu province underlines in respect to the country’s general presidential, legislative and provincial elections of 2006-07 – the first multiparty elections in the DRC in 40 years: “The pride and excitement the Congolese people had in the fact that their country was on the cusp of joining the ranks of the global democracies was visible, as was the intense hope people had that the democratic process would improve their lives.”² But beyond holding elections as an event, the important question is how to promote a process of increasing the representativeness and accountability of decision makers, avoid ignoring issues such as social fragmentation, and support norms and mechanisms by which some citizens do exercise a certain degree of ‘voice’ and claim rights and entitlements. Angola and DRC are examples *par excellence* in which extremely low societal expectations, along with the ‘exhaustion’ of the population after years of war, led to huge victory for the ruling party, cementing its dominance in all aspects of politics and society. Often at the national level, a ruling party (perhaps dominated by a single ethnic or other identity group) increases its veneer of legitimacy abroad and perhaps at home. Locally, power holders with wealth and/or support from state or military authorities may be able to consolidate their position and use their additional power to further their vested or patronage interests. Elections on their own are not enough and need accompanying activities to make things better. What is essential is that country’s stakeholders and its external donors take a long

² Reference Smith, J (2009) Democratisation and Good Governance in the Democratic Republic of Congo: A Case Study of South Kivu Province, International Alert in the Initiative for Peacebuilding, Brussels, 2009.

view about the timeframe and activities that are required to transform political culture(s) – in terms of both the way that power is exercised and how it is constrained.

Like national elections, **the devolution of power to local areas** carries great potential to influence the dynamics of ‘legitimacy’. In theory, by narrowing the distance between those that govern and the people their decisions affect, the ‘accountability’ relationships should be strengthened. The notion of ensuring that officials in the localities are elected locally and not appointed certainly sounds sensible. However, as donors like the EC, have themselves recognised, there is a risk that ‘ethnic, religious or class divisions in society may be exacerbated rather than channelled into democratic debate’³. In practice, the outcomes of such processes can be both positive and negative depending on their goals. For example, as the DRC study argues, an emphasis on the quality of *local* governance does not necessitate the holding of local elections. Results also will depend on how the implementation unfolds. In situations where power is being officially devolved from the centre, other complex issues that have the potential to drive conflict or help increase cohesion may include, e.g. the selection of ‘official’ languages and/or language criteria for recruiting and promoting locally-based state officials and provincial politicians. The IfB Georgia study demonstrates how, in this case, language has been the most serious impediment to forming a unified political community. Georgian legislation prescribes that administrative proceedings must be in Georgian and that all public-sector employees speak Georgian. However, the law is not only difficult to enforce locally, but, if it were to be implemented, would accentuate divisions between non-Georgian speaking communities and their local state officials.

A particularly marked characteristic of many conflict-affected situations is that the **expectations** that people have of their (formal and informal) government system are often very limited. They are certainly quite different from the political mentalities of western country electorates. In places such as the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) of Pakistan that are essentially beyond central government control, feelings of belonging to a national political community are basically non-existent. In the Javakheti districts of Georgia and many of the *territoires* of DRC’s South Kivu province (where logistical challenges and armed groups mean that Congolese state authorities have little ‘reach’), notions of common and shared citizenship are also likely to be much weaker than traditional bonds of ethnic and cultural kinship. In some instances, as in much of eastern DRC, large numbers of locally-resident people, including people who have lived in the area for generations, continue to be rejected as ‘foreigners’ by other local communities and perhaps state security services. This may fuel a desire to be ‘protected’ by a non-state armed group.

³ EIDHR Strategy Paper 2007-2010, European Commission.
http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/where/worldwide/eidhr/documents/eidhr-strategy-paper-2007_en.pdf

Gender issues

In different contexts, the nature of social relations, public ‘voice,’ and hierarchies will vary greatly between women and men according to evolving interpretations and perceptions of household roles, community traditions, institutional (including party political) practices as well as religious ideologies. Where, for example, there are women formally elected to parliament or dynamically active on the local or national political scene, this may mask entrenched and unchanging discrimination and exclusion (notably in relation to holding title to household assets). In Pakistan and DRC, the IfP research underlines the gap between the prominent role of some women in politics and institutional positions compared with prevalent traditional practices such as those limiting women’s rights to inherit family land. In other places, ‘official’ legislative and institutional changes may actually indicate a genuinely positive evolution of the context where it is underpinned by improved education, increased exposure to the more cosmopolitan ways of ‘urban’ life and, above all, greater access to economic opportunities. In Pakistan, the quality of women’s voice and rights appears to be directly linked to their socio-economic status and the degree to which caste traditions are still practised.⁴

The key for serious gender analysis is to dig below the surface and to disaggregate the issues. For example, in respect of the position of women in society, qualitative findings from the country studies are diverse. In Georgia’s Javakheti’s district, for example, Armenian-speaking communities retain ‘traditional’ social practices that limit women’s public roles rather more than their Georgian-speaking neighbours. In the district as a whole, meanwhile, the position of women in public affairs bears no comparison with the situation among the educated urban population of Tbilisi.

Recommendations

1. Overcome institutional resistance to defining peacebuilding objectives as priorities in country strategies, such as:

- Widening a population’s sense of shared identity, interests and mutual obligations at local, provincial and national level.
- Increasing political participation at local level
- Deepening public involvement in influencing the strategies, policies and institutional practices, notably at the local level.
- Strengthening gender equality through transforming levels of public awareness.

2. Pursue the potential that is inherent in all development assistance to increase participation and improve governance through

⁴ reference Mezzera, M. and Aftab, S. Pakistan State-Society Analysis, Initiative for Peacebuilding (2009)

- Integrating these priorities into sectoral work, such as education, health or infrastructure etc.
- Investing in development programmes which have governance impacts locally.
- Use the process to defining development strategies to deepen their ownership by society as a whole.
- Applying performance criteria for projects that will support efforts to consensus-building within communities and between public administration and citizens.

**PDCI and Partners-Georgia follow up activities:
Empowering citizens of Javakheti, Georgia to participate in the political process**

As the goal of this IfP project was to identify the ways and means by which a culture of genuine political participation can be built, and how this endeavour can best be supported by external actors, PDCI and Partners-Georgia decided to put two of the main recommendations from the Georgian research report into practice. The first recommendation was to promote the sustainability and capacity of local civil society organisations beyond donor-driven projects, particularly in the areas of human security, gender equality, good governance, rule of law, and minority representation. This also includes building centre-regional partnerships and knowledge exchange between national and local CSOs. The second recommendation was to enhance minority integration and representation. It deals with current government approaches to minority issues, including new organs and policies to address minority concerns, and civic education opportunities⁵.

These recommendations are being addressed through training in consensus building and cooperative planning techniques that improve the capacity of local CSOs to participate in the political process. Following the training, PDCI and Partners Georgia will conduct a series of facilitation sessions which provide a unique opportunity for local stakeholders to discuss issues and search for solutions related to the integration of the Armenian population, including language issues, women's representation, access to education, and employment opportunities. At this stage of the process, PDCI will stimulate cross-sector cooperation and creation of joint solutions with a step-by-step approach to any chosen issue. The aim is to build consensus around a pressing local issue that would benefit from collaborative decision-making. This process serves to build the capacity of civil society to engage more actively in local political processes, and improve the state-civil society relationship that is critical to effective democratization.

⁵ (Metreveli, E., J., Kulik, Social Relations and Governance in Javakheti, Georgia, Initiative for Peacebuilding, Brussels 2009).

Other activities undertaken as part of the project include consultations with local and central authorities, and roundtables including government and local officials, local and central CSOs to raise awareness of political processes and promote political participation at the local and national levels. The roundtables also encourage sharing of international best practices regarding minority integration and representation. The process supports cooperation between central and local CSOs and builds networks of local civil society organisations to facilitate their participation in structured political consultations with authorities.

The whole package of activities promotes the power and influence of unrepresented people in society through a democratic process, characterised by participation, equality in dignity and rights, transparency and accountability. The process cannot stay isolated from official measures and instruments for democratic governance, but it suggests and promotes those measures through cooperative thinking and actions by all parties involved. As stated in the SIDA report on Democratic Governance in International Development Cooperation the central point is “the state’s will and capacity to live up to its responsibility, and to the best of its ability, for guaranteeing the human rights and freedoms for all women, men, girls and boys⁶”

⁶ (*Digging Deeper: Four Reports on Democratic Governance in International Development Cooperation*, Swedish, International Development Agency (Sida).