Supporting Change from Below: Some Theoretical Aspects of Micro-Assistance to Democracy

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Foreign actors have always influenced political changes in developing countries. During the Cold War, for instance, Western governments extensively promoted their political and economic interests in areas as various as Latina America, Africa and Asia, often by opposing democratically elected governments under the highly debatable justification of countering the ‘red danger’ of quickly-spreading socialist ideals. During the last decade, with the apparent victory of liberal democracy over all possible alternatives, the promotion of democracy suddenly became part of the foreign policy agenda of Western governments. Not only did humanitarian interventions become common in several regions of the world, but international interference for promoting democracy and protecting human rights also came to be justified as a duty of the international community.

Among the many instruments employed to promote democracy abroad, international donors have made extensive use of democracy assistance programmes. In practice, democracy assistance refers to the part of foreign aid that regards democracy issues and that is usually termed ‘political aid’: under this category, one can find programmes aimed at institution building, as well as support to parliaments, political parties, civil society organisations and the like. The distinction between democracy assistance and other measures of democracy promotion is grounded not only on the acceptability of the intervention, but more importantly it is based on a different understanding of democratisation dynamics: whereas other instruments (military intervention, sanctions, etc.) imply that democracy can be imposed from the outside, democracy assistance implicitly accepts that democratic development is an internal process in which domestic forces are the key players. In this respect, democracy assistance understands foreign political intervention as a means of triggering democratisation from within.

Yet, although aiming at promoting democracy from within, democracy assistance has often been top-down. Donors have devoted the bulk of funds to elections (almost exclusively to transitional national elections) and have usually failed to assist countries in the aftermath, that is, when democratic loyalties must be constructed and democratic deepening becomes a serious challenge: in a word, during the consolidation of democracy. Donors have also supported institutions such as parliaments, the judiciary and the like, by working at the elite level, forgetting that in many cases the real challenge of consolidating democracy is to make the entire political system more democratic. Cases such as South Africa clearly point out how training political and social elites does not necessarily bring about democratic consolidation, especially when the majority of the population still lives under power structures that resemble patronage.

So, despite that democracy assistance rightly signals the need to support domestic dynamics, it has scarcely been effective in reaching those layers of the political system where the most serious challenges to democratic consolidation lie. As a response, a few donors have started acknowledging the need to take alternative instruments on board, with the aim of promoting the deepening of democracy: in doing so, they have started looking at local, often community-based organisations as vehicles to support democracy from below. This kind of approach is what I term ‘micro-assistance

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1 By ‘international donors’, scholars usually mean entities as various as Western governments, intern-governmenntal agencies (such as the UN, European Commission, World Bank, etc.), public donors (such as USAID, NED, SIDA, etc.), private foundations (such as the Soros Foundation, Carter Foundation, etc.), some transnational non-governmental organisations, party foundations (such as the Stiftungen), religious organisations (such as Caritas, Norwegian Church Aid, etc.) and the like.
to democracy’. Supporting a bottom-up process of democratic consolidation also has important theoretical and practical implications, as I will argue in the following part of this article.

**A Copernican Revolution: from Macro to Micro**

There exists a nexus between promoting democracy and fighting poverty, which goes beyond the obvious (although not always accepted) belief that democracy cannot be sustained where poverty is rampant and where high inequality shadows the gains of democratic government. I will use the insights drawn from the international fight against poverty to shed some light on similar challenges posed to the promotion of democracy around the world.

In spite of the fact that the official fight against poverty has long been permeated by a top-down mentality, several attempts to develop bottom-up strategies proved more successful than longstanding policies implemented by governments and financial institutions. This inversion of thinking was largely brought about by the success of micro-credit experiments during the 1980s and the 1990s.

The idea of micro-credit was first put into practice in Bangladesh by the economist Muhammad Yunus, with the establishment of Grameen Bank: the bank of the poor. The rationale of micro-credit is as simple as it is effective: poverty can only be successfully fought if loans are available to the poor. In fact, the commercial bank system systematically excludes the poor because of the high requirements concerning loans. In the micro-credit vision, economic development is a daily process in which locally-specific needs and dynamics play a determinant role. Since micro-credit tries to promote co-operative attitudes among people, local involvement is crucial for success. For instance, in order to reach good levels of co-operation, individuals are put together in groups and responsibilities are shared within each group. But this requires a high level of local knowledge, especially about cultures and traditions, which more often than not can be successfully exploited to encourage co-operation.

This clashes against the philosophy of international financial institutions that, on the contrary, understand economic development as the outcome of a correct, standardised macro-economic recipe. In sum, in the micro-credit view, traditional anti-poverty policies fail not only because they do not result in positive outcomes for the intended beneficiaries, but also because they understand economic development as a top-down process that can be supported with some technical financial adjustments. The micro-credit experiment proved so effective that several international institutions have started adopting micro-credit programmes in their plans to counter poverty.

Much can be learned from the micro-credit rationale when we shift our attention from economic to political development, but one point is of particular interest: the trust in people’s involvement and participation. In the micro-credit view, the implication is that giving people a loan to start a productive activity is an effective way to contribute to the general economic development of a society: since the productive system is not accessible to the poor, micro-credit gives the people a chance to be an active part in it. A similar point can be made as to micro-assistance to democracy: since the democratic system remains scarcely accessible to the people, small civil society groups at the local level can be a vehicle of popular access to democratic governance and, ultimately, vertical accountability. Micro-assistance to democracy would basically mean assistance to those spontaneous collective initiatives undertaken by local civil society organisations.
Micro-assistance to democracy also contributes to eliminate an often-mentioned criticism against more traditional democracy assistance, namely the standardisation of intervention. Often and rightly, democracy assistance programmes have been criticised as highly standardised across countries, as if supporting democracy was nothing else than applying the right recipe of institutional modelling. Also patronising in its practical implementation, this aspect of democracy assistance has been one of the most detrimental, and is based mainly on the need to report back home to tax payers rather than on meeting local demands. On the contrary, micro-assistance to democracy requires local actors to define the aspects of their own involvement, not only encouraging much higher levels of ownership but also carving out space for ‘authorship’: that is, not only may local civil society organisations implement projects decided upon by donors, but they should also determine what kind of problems must be addressed and the means to be employed to do so.

Micro-assistance to democracy can also contribute to re-examining the general assistance to civil society. In this respect, a widely echoed criticism has been raised about what type of civil society donors promote. Many researches have confirmed that international donors privilege a specific type of civil society organisation (mostly well equipped, westernised NGOs capable of complying with the requirements of donors) that resembles the Euro-American model of civil society groups rather than the local socio-political culture. Not addressing this problem may seriously damage the development of a country-specific civil society and bring about a standardisation of civil society actors around the world, regardless of the capacity of these actors to effectively interact with the specific cultural and social needs of the local population.

Evaluating Democracy from Below: a Cartesian Revolution

A recurring enigma for scholars and practitioners has often regarded how to evaluate democracy assistance. Evaluating democracy is an extremely haphazard sector of research that has more to do with art than science. Macro-indicators are extremely debatable, not only for the rough way in which they are constructed, but also because they require the extremely costly assumption that there exists a correlation between the amount of funds that is spent on a country and its democratic performance. When a country becomes more or less democratic, it is extremely difficult (if not impossible) to argue that this is due to the impact of democracy assistance programmes: too many factors overlap, existing causal relations are hard to detect, too many actors are involved, etc.

Although remaining a difficult effort, evaluating micro-assistance to democracy is likely to overcome or simplify many of the obstacles that macro-programmes have encountered. Evaluating outcomes at the micro-level is more feasible for the simple reason that the impact is potentially visible in the restricted universe that surrounds the project on the ground. Assessing micro-assistance to democracy might provide an extremely fertile ground for a participatory methodology to evaluation, in which assessing the results of projects might inherently contribute to the goal of promoting popular participation and democratic deepening.

If the general notion of micro-assistance to democracy can be defined as a Copernican revolution, since it inverts the process of political development, when it comes to evaluation methodology the revolution is essentially Cartesian: by regressing to the grassroots impact, which is the only measurable one, we can attempt to reconstruct the chain of influence that single projects have on higher levels of the political system. Clearly, evaluating micro-assistance to democracy is more demanding than asking some questions to donors’ officials in quick fly-in missions from abroad. It requires the willingness to reach out to the projects on the field, to monitor their development over time, and to rely more extensively on the skills of local actors. Despite difficulties, we should not forget that other more traditional methods of evaluation have been particularly notorious for their failures, and that significant information has been nonexistent, or sporadic at best. Democracy
assistance, since the enthusiastic wave of donor funding in the 1990s, has basically operated in the
darkness.

Conclusive Remarks

Clearly micro-assistance to democracy is not a rapid means for supporting democratic consolidation, just as micro-credit has never claimed to eliminate poverty overnight. The limits of a micro-strategy to development (both economic and political) are evident. Nevertheless, gradual development can make the difference, especially when other (more ambitious) strategies have dramatically failed even after requiring expensive structures and painful adjustment plans. Moreover, micro-assistance to democracy does not claim to be an alternative to other forms of pressure, especially when dramatic political reversals take place. However, micro-assistance to democracy essentially understands political change not only as a primarily domestic process, but also as a bottom-up process that can be nurtured from below.

The argument that democracy assistance systematically fails is often echoed in different circumstances, from some more radical academic debates to social movements’ discourse. Although revealing relevant concerns, this pessimistic argument misses a part of the picture: internal democratising forces can positively exploit democracy assistance. In the case of micro-assistance to democracy, foreign assistance can provide thousands of people with a socially active role, especially in cases of consolidation where political apathy is more than a remote possibility.

Micro-assistance to democracy is an idea that stems from the practice of many small civil society organisations that operate at the frontline of democracy promotion and are often neglected by donors’ big plans. Micro-credit was not developed as a theory, but instead was born as a practice. Its actual functioning gave birth to a theory of development. So does micro-assistance to democracy.

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