3. Democracy and Governance Assessment (USAID)

A framework for assessing democracy and governance, to design effective approaches to promote democracy and improve governance

What is the Democracy and Governance Assessment?

The Democracy and Governance Assessment is a framework designed by USAID for assessing the state of democracy and governance in a country, and the prospects for their improvement. The framework 'guides a political analysis of the country, leads program choices, and incorporates what researchers and practitioners have learned from comparative experience' (USAID, 2000: 1). The framework aims to identify certain comparable elements of countries' political economy and institutions and use those to inform a strategic analysis of how best to promote democracy and good governance. The assessment focuses on the aspects of context USAID considers relevant to encouraging or enabling countries to develop liberal democratic government: 'order, liberty, open competition, the rule of law, and respect for pluralism and minority rights' (ibid).

This technique is less intellectually ambitious than some of the other approaches. It does address some comparable aspects of context, but the map produced is more selective in the features it chooses to explore. It is designed to provide an entry-point analytical overview for those considering actions to promote democracy in a given country. As USAID's Democracy and Governance Assessment for Tanzania states: 'The methodology is not intended to produce an exhaustive description of recent political history, but rather to enable small field teams to provide a political-economic "snapshot", intended to surface principal structural dilemmas, political dynamics and, to the extent possible, identify trends' (ARD and USAID, 2003: 1).

How does the Democracy and Governance Assessment work?

USAID missions are responsible for submitting strategic plans for their use of programme funds. They are expected to use the framework to inform this process as they see fit. The framework is not prescriptive. The assessment framework is divided into four steps:

- An **analysis of the kind of political 'game'** that characterises the country and of the problems relating to the transition to or consolidation of democracy.
- A more specific analysis of actors, interests, resources, and strategies leading to an understanding of **how the political 'game' is actually being played** in the country.
- An **analysis of the institutional arenas** (legal, governmental and civil society) in which the 'game' is played.
- The **interests and resources of the donors**, including USAID.

The first three steps are aimed at generating a range of possible strategies for support or intervention. The fourth step is concerned to understand the feasibility of putting these possible strategies in place. In effect, Steps 1 to 3 provide a map of possible routes; Step 4 assesses the routes that might realistically be taken.

The methods of data collection and analysis are primarily a combination of desk research and interviews or focus group sessions with key country stakeholders. The amount of time and resources required varies but research for each of the three studies included in the Key References was coordinated by a team of three people (USAID staff and consultants) over a period of approximately one month.

Elements of the Democracy and Governance Assessment

Conceptual approach and indicators

- USAID's characterisation of context as a political game – involving players, interests, resources, objectives, rules, arenas, and ways of playing – may provide CSOs with a useful metaphor for understanding their own contexts. The questions suggested by USAID to explore the dimensions of the political 'game' (see Box 5) may also be of use.

Box 5: Dimensions of the political game

- **Consensus:** To what extent is there consensus on the fundamental rules of the game, and to what extent is the political contest played according to those rules?

- **Competition:** To what extent does meaningful competition take place in the political system and in other arenas of society? To what extent are there elections, a competition of ideas, a free media, and a vibrant civil society? Are meaningful checks and balances present in government? Is competition allowed and institutionalised? Are competitive arenas accessible? Is the competition fair? Is the political contest formalised, routine, and regulated by publicly accepted rules and norms?

- **Inclusion:** Are there problems of inclusion and exclusion? Are parts of the population formally excluded and disenfranchised from meaningful political, social, or economic participation? Are there formal guarantees of inclusion?

- **Rule of law:** Is there ordered liberty? Is politics, indeed are life, liberty, and property, bound by a rule of law?

- **Governance:** To what extent do social institutions (both in the public and private sectors), demonstrate a capacity to make and meet commitments, deliver reliably a minimum of social services and be held accountable for their performance?

- USAID's approach to looking at incentives, rules and institutions is likely to be of great interest to CSOs seeking to map their own contexts (see USAID, 2000: 83-5).

- CSOs should bear in mind that USAID's approach to mapping context is benchmarked against the template of an idealised Western democratic model. As such, although elements of it may be useful, it does embody certain normative assumptions.

Data

- USAID stresses the importance of a preparatory phase reviewing what material/information is available prior to embarking on mapping context. CSOs would be well advised to follow this approach. They might also find the range of ways to collecting data which are outlined in the USAID approach – meetings with key representatives of society, including politicians, activists, researchers, NGOs and donors – to be of use.

- USAID stresses that along with desk research, mapping country context requires extensive consultation with people with an intimate knowledge of the context. For local CSOs, this should not be a problem, but international CSOs seeking to understand contexts other than their own should take heed.

Analysis, presentation and recommendations

- USAID's overall approach – that of seeking to understand how the system works and to identify opportunities to make it work differently to produce better outcomes – is one that CSOs might find very productive.

- CSOs seeking to understand context in countries characterised by neo-patrimonialism might find USAID's analytical approach and suggested questions for diagnosing patronage of great help. For example, see ARD and USAID (2003: 55-62), on Tanzania.

- The USAID reports themselves can be useful to a broader range of users. They can provide 'outsiders' with a good working knowledge of history and opinions on the political context in a

country, and on the actors within that context. For CSOs, the reports' exploration of factors such as open political competition, pluralism and respect for the rights of minorities will likely be very relevant for CSOs and others who want to influence policy.

- The Tanzania report provides a good example of how the framework has been used, with the recommendations section showing how the analysis of the system can lead to recommendations for action.

Key references

The assessment tool itself can be found at:
USAID (2000) 'Conducting a DG assessment: a Framework for Strategy Development', Centre for Democracy and Governance, USAID, Washington, DC, online at http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/ democracy_and_governance/publications/pdfs/pnach305.pdf.

Examples of application of the tool:
Crosby, B., J. Michele Guttmann and B. Kay (2004) 'Paraguay Democracy and Governance Assessment', Management Systems International, Washington, DC.

Kay Smith, Z., T. Longman, J. P. Kimonyo and T. Rutagengwa (2002) 'Rwanda Democracy and Governance Assessment', Management Systems International, Washington, DC.

ARD and USAID (2003) 'Democracy and Governance Assessment of Tanzania – Transitions from the Single-Party State', ARD, Burlington, Vermont, submitted to USAID, online at http://pdf.dec.org/pdf_docs/Pdacd437.pdf.