

DLGN – Learning project 1: Civil Society Participation and Accountability in Local Governance Processes

Synthesis of e-discussion

The Learning Project was launched by SDC in the framework of DLGN and mandated to HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation. Recommendations were formulated on the basis of eight case studies and four mirroring cases and were further debated in an e-discussion conducted between the 9th and the 19th of April. This document is a synthesis of the main discussion points.

First topic: Political parties and parliaments

→ *Why do projects/programmes hesitate to work with political actors? What are the risks and challenges of working with them?*

There is a widespread opinion, among citizens as well as development agencies, that politics is a “treacherous” (or slippery) territory. In many countries political power is often misused and as a consequence citizens perceive it as a means through which their political representatives pursue private enrichment and partisan or business interests rather than as a means through which they serve their constituencies.

Extremely politicised settings make it difficult to cooperate with politicians without being automatically identified with their partisan interests. This would have two main consequences:

- If the agency is cooperating with the ruling party and a political overturning occurs, the ex-opposition party would consider the agency as an opposing party, undermining the sustainability of its programmes. This occurs in particular in **strongly polarised settings** and is exacerbated by **volatility and instability** of governments.
- Being identified with one party would threaten **the agency’s image of equity, impartiality and neutrality and jeopardize the trust to projects.**

In countries with a single-Party system, where the one party controls all institutions, programmes cannot avoid engaging with it. However, this can of course threaten the neutral image of the agency, since collaborating with the system may increase the legitimacy of that system.

In many countries where development agencies work, governments are very instable and volatile. Frequent changes in the political settings may undermine the impact and sustainability of projects and programmes. For example, frequent and unpredictable changes in the composition of parliaments would considerably reduce (if not ruin) the impact of projects that offer trainings to MPs.

The consequences of engaging with political actors are often difficult to predict. Cooperating with such actors may lead programmes to face increased opposition and barriers and would thus need **bigger investment of resources** in terms of research, dialogue, money and time. As a consequence, projects and programmes often prefer to **adopt the “easier route”** and avoid engaging with political actors.

Development agencies themselves often cultivate the prejudice that politics is something external, political parties are to be excluded and power is something negative. Also the tools available for the analysis of power are often underpinned by this prejudice.

However, politics is part of governance and any intervention in local governance is social engineering and consequently a political process. The major challenge for governance projects is thus to understand politics without prejudice: in order to do that, it is of foremost importance for every project to conduct regular institutional and context analysis of power structures (cf. topic 2).

→ Do you have positive experiences in working with political representatives or parliaments? Or do you experienced situations where the decision of not cooperating with political actors had particularly negative or positive consequences?

The most common strategy to engage with political actors is to work with *all actors within a specific group*, for example with *all members of a parliament* or *all candidates for mayors* in a municipality. This way programmes avoid political discrimination and preserve their neutrality and impartiality. The e-discussion highlighted several successful example of this strategy:

- Serbia: The SDC Rule of Law and Democracy Programme successfully engages with **local parliaments**, in which both the ruling party and the opposition are represented. Having the support of the parliament means thus having the support of both political forces. Consequently, elections and changes of political power balances at the national or local level only have a minor impact on projects.
- Mongolia: The SDC Governance and Decentralisation Programme (GDP) started a project in collaboration with UNDP and **the Parliament's Standing Committee on State Structure** that aims at strengthening capacities of **all local parliaments**. By indiscriminately engaging with all ~7000 local MPs, the project ensures a neutral approach and a non-partisan image.
- Ukraine: The Swiss-Ukrainian Decentralisation Support Project (DESPRO) cooperates with **the Secretariat of the Committee on State Building and Local Self-Government of the Parliament of Ukraine**, which is responsible for the preparation of the draft legislation relevant for local governance. DESPRO offers, among others, legal expertise on governance-related issues to all members of the Secretariat, irrespective of their differing political affiliations.
- India: The PRS Legislative Research (PRS) provides independent research to **all members of the Indian Parliament and of the Legislatives Assemblies**. The role of PRS is perceived as impartial because it is directed to all members without discrimination.
- Lao PDR: In a one-party state, it is very challenging to strengthen the civil society. SDC started in Laos the project "support to Civil Society", but it also started a collaboration with the **National Assembly (NA)** in order to strengthen its oversight and scrutiny role.
- Kosovo: The LOGOS project works with **all candidates for mayors** in several municipalities. The project indiscriminately provides to all candidates information on citizens' requests and gives them the opportunity to develop their own response and promote their programme in public TV debates. A risk faced by the project is that current mayors who are partners of other LOGOS activities will feel deceived by its engagement with their opponents. In order to avoid this reaction, current mayors receive a little more space than other candidates in TV debates, where they can present the achievements of their administration.

Another strategy is to individually collaborate with selected political actors on the basis of their professional backgrounds, irrespective of their political background. When working on this approach, programmes need a careful analysis of the political landscape in order to identify so-called "**champions of change**" among parliamentarians or political actors in general. This approach also results in the advantage that programmes can count on inside lobbying for policy changes by the selected actors; on the other hand, however, there is a risk of being identified with partisan interests.

- Ukraine: Recent elections changed the composition of the Ukrainian Parliament. DESPRO is collaborating with the Secretariat of the Committee (see above) to identify "champions of LSG reforms" among the new MPs who could engage in lobbying in favour of LSG reforms.
- Mongolia: Also many GDP projects cooperate with MPs who are considered to be "champions of reforms" independently from their political party affiliation. Thanks to this strategy, the political shift which occurred after the last elections did not impact strongly on the GDP projects.

Second topic: Mitigating risks linked to power issues in programmes

→ Do you address visible, hidden and invisible power in the analysis of the context and of stakeholders? With which tools? How do you monitor changes in power relations?

- **In Mongolia, GDP used the stakeholder analysis tool proposed by SDC's PED network.** Basically, the characteristics of each stakeholder were analysed along **eight criteria**: *Role & functions, Administrative position, Stakes & interests, Reform perception, Influence on decentralisation issues, Interest in decentralisation issues, Strengths, Weaknesses*. Moreover, to each actor a **power index** was attributed, composed of **five different types of power**: *financial, position, expert, networking and information power*. The analysis' results were summarised in a matrix, which GDP aims to update every six months. This should allow formally monitoring changes in power relations.
- **In Albania, the Decentralisation and Local Development Programme (dlpd) uses SWOT analyses to assess the strengths and weaknesses of each actor.** Dldp does not carry out a systematic power analysis like the ones conducted by GDP (e.g. power index); however, considerations on respective power of the different actors are an important part of dldp's SWOT analyses.

→ How do you integrate the analysis of power relations in the project design, partners' and target groups' selection? What measures can be taken to mitigate risks related to power issues thus avoiding an escalation of conflicts?

"A programme cannot gain consensus for change if not coping with power relations", a participant of the e-discussion states. **The results of power analyses need to be considered while *designing projects or programme strategies, developing strategies for policy influence, exercising the role of facilitator, and selecting partners.***

- **Diversifying the partners of a programme/project has proven to be a successful strategy to reduce risk and improve sustainability and effectiveness,** in particular while working with political actors. However, engaging with several partners requires more efforts for coordination and dialogue, which leads to losses in the **short-term efficiency** of the intervention. Diversifying partners might therefore be challenging under time or money constraints and clashes with the need of quick and convincing outputs/outcomes.
- **Also flexibility in the project/programme design and implementation was mentioned as a successful strategy to reduce risk and improve sustainability and effectiveness.** Working on more levels, with different partners and with different intervention modalities allows diversifying and thus reducing risks and at the same time being open to new opportunities.

Two programmes in Albania and Mongolia would have faced much bigger risks without a careful power assessment and represent good examples for the successful implementation of the mentioned strategies for risk reduction.

- Albania: Because of a political stalemate, power balances shifted and some partners of dldp lost a considerable part of their legitimacy. In order to overcome the situation, dldp organised a multi-stakeholder platform to conduct participatory SWOT analyses. Three institutions participated in the platform, each of which had its strengths and weaknesses (legitimacy, experience, know-how). The three institutions, together with dldp, decided to work in partnership so that strengths could be shared (e.g. the legitimacy of one institution gave legitimacy to its partners too) and weaknesses overcome (e.g. sharing of know-how).
- Mongolia: A careful stakeholder analysis (see above) was carried out by GDP in the phase of strategy planning. *"The results of the analysis helped us shape the programme in ways that*

we would have not realized otherwise". In fact, the analysis showed that no single governmental institution had enough power to implement a local governance reform programme. Working with only one governmental partner posed the risk that other players would exercise their "veto power" or at least passively obstruct the reform process. GDP thus decided to work at the same time with the three most important governmental partners, i.e. to *diversify its partners*. This decision led, of course, to losses in efficiency (resources invested in coordination) but increased the governmental support and contributed to *depoliticising the programme* and finally enhanced its sustainability.

The initial analysis of GDP also revealed the complexity of the national reform agenda and the multiple and differing objectives pursued by different actors. GDP's answer to this challenge was to adopt a more flexible organisation: the programme is now organised in broadly diversified and considerably autonomous "components" and "modules", which can be "speeded up" or "slowed down" according to the necessities of the moment.

Conclusions

Participants of the e-discussion confirm that **power and politics are intrinsic elements of governance: any intervention in local governance is a political process that implies action on power relations**. Therefore, it is of utmost importance for programmes and projects **to meticulously address power in their context analyses *without prejudice against it*, and to integrate the results in programme designs**. The two examples from Albania and Mongolia show that a careful analysis of power can make a huge difference for the success of a programme.

Addressing power also implies addressing political relations. Therefore, it is necessary to engage with political actors. Of course, politics can have many negative connotations and working with politicians poses a range of risks and challenges. However, these problems should not lead to the neglect of political actors but to **engage even more deeply in accurate and regular context analyses and power assessments**. The many examples described by participants show that successfully working with political actors is possible and that different strategies are available for doing it. **Diversification of strategies, partners and intervention modalities** has revealed to be one successful strategy to reduce the risks both of engaging with political actors and of working in contexts of rapidly changing power relations.



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