

FROM STRATEGY TO IMPLEMENTATION

The case of civil society

Susan Dodsworth and Nic Cheeseman

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This paper demonstrates the challenges that those working to strengthen democracy confront in putting their strategies into practice, using the Westminster Foundation for Democracy's (WFD) work with civil society as an example. While formulating effective interventions is a significant challenge, how to go about implementing them is often just as problematic. This problem is particularly acute when it comes to supporting key democratic institutions through programmes that seek to harness civil society. The paper begins by situating WFD's support to civil society within its broader strategy, considering why WFD supports civil society and where it fits in its theory of change. It then explores how WFD implements that strategy on the ground using a current programme in Macedonia as an example. The paper analyses strategy and implementation in light of existing research on the role of civil society in democratization and the way in which the international community supports it. This allows us identify the strengths and weaknesses of the current approach, as well as options for mitigating risks and windows of opportunity for increasing impact. These have implications beyond WFD; the Department for International Development's recent Civil Society Partnership Review demonstrates that other organisations face similar issues.





Artillery House, 11-19 Artillery Row,
London,
SW1P 1RT

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KEY LESSONS

- Motivations for engaging with civil society vary. Different motivations lead to diverse strategies, each with a unique set of strengths and weaknesses.
- WFD occupies a specific niche in civil society strengthening: it builds connections between civil society and parliaments, and (to a lesser extent) political parties.
- The way that WFD supports civil society is distinctive in that it is primarily a means to an end, intended to reinforce and complement work with parliaments and political parties.
- WFD strategy is well designed with the potential to make a valuable contribution, but current modes of implementation risk perpetuating a de-politicized vision of what civil society is or ought to be.
- This problem is not unique to WFD. Lessons learnt by WFD therefore have value for other democracy supporters.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Those seeking to strengthen democratic institutions via support to civil society should:

- Make greater efforts to critically assess and clearly identify which types of civil society they are seeking to support.
- Be alert to the ways in which programme delivery can limit and bias the range of civil society actors that they engage.
- Exploit programmes that integrate legislative strengthening and political party support as an opportunity to engage with a broader range of civil society organisations.
- Identify how they can motivate parliaments to defend civil society space. This requires incentives, not simply information.

Civil society is a central part of the democracy support tool-kit. Those who seek to promote democracy typically identify a strong and vibrant civil society as an essential driver of democratization and defender of democracy. Supporting civil society is popular because it offers the tantalising prospect of fostering change from the ground up. Adding to its appeal, civil society provides democracy supporters with an alternative to engaging directly with governments that are highly repressive or corrupt. Though it is difficult to pin down exactly how much democracy aid goes to civil society (Box 4), it is clear it is a substantial amount.

Though civil society remains popular in democracy support – some might say ubiquitous – democracy supporters have been forced to reassess their strategies for supporting it, and the manner in which they implement them, over the last few years. There are several reasons for this. One is that democracy support generally, and support to civil society in particular, has begun to trigger a backlash; authoritarian leaders now recognise foreign support in this area as a threat and have developed a range of countermeasures. There is also a well-established danger that support to civil society – however well intended – can have perverse effects, eroding the connections between civil society organisations and citizens, influencing the issues they prioritise, and distorting their internal structures, ultimately undermining both legitimacy and effectiveness. Academic research, combined with several decades of practical experience, has also produced a more nuanced understanding of the impact of civil society in processes of democratization. Though it can play a critical role in both promoting and defending democracy, and is sometimes defined in a way that assumes this is always the case (see Box 2), civil society is not necessarily an unmitigated boon for democracy. The role of the People’s Alliance for Democracy (also known as the ‘Yellow Shirts’) in destabilizing Thailand’s elected government and legitimizing a military coup in 2006 provides a case in point.

Simply put, changed circumstances and an expanded knowledge base necessitate critical reflection on the strategies designed to support civil society and the manner of their

implementation. Here, civil society support exposes a weak spot in democracy support more broadly: the difficulty of evaluating impact. Evaluations of democracy support face a host of methodological challenges.¹ Democratization is also a complex, uneven and lengthy process; the benefits of a particular programme may only come to light years after its conclusion. The complexity of political change often means that confident attribution of causality is all but impossible. The activities that comprise a programme may be successfully completed, but the contribution of those activities to changes in the nature of the national political regime is generally extremely hard to detect. Democracy supporters do not have the luxury of testing what would have happened if their programme had not occurred.

Several years ago, these challenges led Peter Burnell to suggest that democracy supporters should make greater efforts to evaluate their strategies in advance, rather than relying exclusively on ex-post evaluations of particular projects or programs.² This policy paper attempts to implement that suggestion, presenting a forward-looking evaluation of WFD’s strategy for supporting civil society that draws on a number of different sources (Box 1). Previous work suggests that civil society is a particularly interesting area to conduct such an exercise. More than a decade ago Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers made the following observation about the international community’s efforts to promote democracy by supporting civil society:

The problem is not simply that donors’ efforts are limited in scope and thus can have only a limited impact – this is unavoidable with any assistance program. Rather, the problem resides both in the conception of civil society that donors build into their assistance programs and the methods by which they implement such aid.³

With these points in mind, this policy paper does three things. First, it situates WFD’s support to civil society within its broader strategy, considering why WFD supports civil society and where it fits in its theory of change. This highlights the fact that WFD occupies a specific niche in civil society strengthening: it builds connections

between civil society and parliaments, and (to a lesser extent) political parties. For WFD, stronger civil society is primarily (though perhaps not entirely) a means to an end rather than an end in itself. The paper then explores how WFD implements that strategy on the ground using a current WFD programme in Macedonia as an example. This helps to ground our analysis of WFD's strategy and its implementation, which we evaluate in light of existing research on civil society, the role of civil society in democratic consolidation, and the way in which the international community supports it.

We identify strengths in WFD's approach, but also some weaknesses. While WFD's strategy targets a clear need, current modes of implementation risk perpetuating a de-politicized vision of what civil society ought to be. This leads to several options for mitigating risk and also generates windows of opportunity for increasing impact. Most notably, there is significant potential to exploit new integrated programmes (those that combine legislative strengthening with political party support) to engage with a broader range of civil society organisations. Finally, we consider what our analysis of WFD's approach means for other democracy supporters. The challenges that WFD confronts in its work with civil society are not unique. The Department for International Development's (DFID) recent Civil Society Partnership Review considered how some of these issues affected its engagement with civil society, both in the UK and overseas. Lessons learnt from WFD's experience therefore have value for other actors who support civil society as a means of promoting democracy around the world.

CIVIL SOCIETY STRENGTHENING AS A MEANS TO AN END

Civil society is not a core part of WFD's mandate. In 2015, the Triennial Review of WFD led by Andrew Tesoriere and William Robinson described civil society as 'largely incidental' to its main programming. Our own review of WFD's programmes suggests that this is an accurate description in some respects, but misleading in others. Civil society is important to WFD, but it is

not a core part of its mandate and so it naturally tends to be a small component of larger WFD programmes, typically those that are targeted at parliaments, and to a lesser extent those that target political parties. For example, WFD's 2012-2015 programme in the Democratic Republic of the Congo focussed on building the capacity of the Provincial Assembly of Province Orientale, but included a component that provided capacity building for female MPs and civil society activists in order to strengthen the political participation of women. Civil society is only rarely the primary focus of a WFD programme, as it is in WFD's programme in Macedonia, discussed below, though it does often play a role in their implementation (see Box 3). This fact is reflected in a breakdown of WFD programme expenditure, illustrated in Figure 1.

WFD PROGRAMME EXPENDITURE 2012/13 - 2014/15

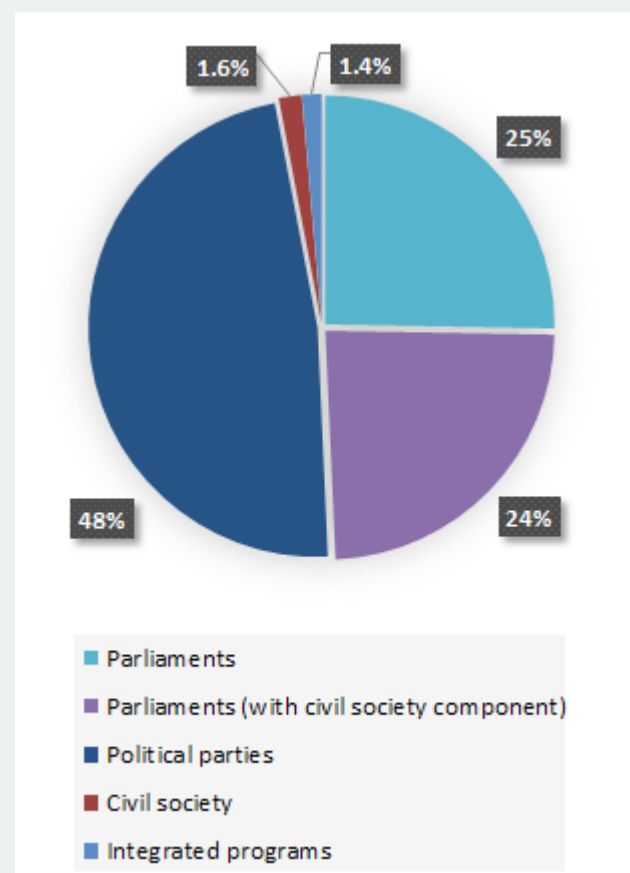


Figure 1

This pattern of expenditure is quite distinct. For many (possibly most) other democracy support organisations, civil society accounts for a much larger proportion of democracy aid, though its dual role as beneficiary and implementer (Box 3) makes it difficult to pin down precisely how much democracy aid is devoted to strengthening civil society as opposed to delivering programmes designed to benefit others (Box 4). The relatively small role of civil society in WFD's programming does raise genuine questions about whether this is an area where WFD should be investing its inevitably-finite resources. In 2015, the Triennial Review queried whether civil society strengthening might be better left to other organisations with more expertise, and greater financial resources, in this area. However, the authors of the review reported that many of those they consulted 'considered WFD's parliamentary and political party assistance work would under-deliver if they did not include a civil society dimension, since citizen engagement was vital to overall longer-term impact and success.'⁴

This hints at why describing WFD's civil society work as 'incidental' is misleading. Civil society may not be a core part of WFD's mandate, but it plays a critical role in WFD's pursuit of its goals. However, for WFD civil society is primarily a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. This is implicit in WFD's current strategic documents, but it may be worth making explicit in future so as to ensure clarity about why WFD supports civil society and what it expects such support to achieve. Both WFD's Corporate Plan 2011-2014 and current Strategic Framework 2015-2020 describe civil society as something that contributes to the ability of parliaments to represent citizens and formulate policy, and as an actor that demands accountability from parliaments (and other institutions). This is reflected in WFD's current logical framework and theory of change, both of which articulate WFD goals in this area in terms of the ability of civil society groups to access and engage with parliaments and political parties. Those documents identified the desired output as 'brokered relationships and political space for policy change



BOX 1 OUR EVIDENCE BASE

The analysis presented in this paper draws on several sources. These include:

- i. WFD's strategic documents (including the Strategic Framework 2015-2020, Corporate Plan 2011-2015, and current Theory of Change);
- ii. external evaluations of WFD's work, commissioned by the Department for International Development and the Foreign & Commonwealth Office;
- iii. selected programme documents covering the period 2010-2015 (including proposals, reports and internal evaluations); and,
- iv. interviews with key staff based in WFD's central office, selected field offices, and the UK political party offices.

One weakness of this evidence base is that it relies heavily on self-assessment. This could create a bias towards classifying programmes as successful. However, while some programme reports may err on the side of optimism, interviewees were generally frank in acknowledging where programmes could have performed better and were reasonably cautious in claiming credit for changes in the political landscape. In future research we intend to also speak to programme beneficiaries to capture

Figure 2

THE LOGIC BEHIND WFD'S APPROACH



that, in the countries where WFD works, most civil society organisations lack the requisite skills and relationships to access and influence political parties and parliaments effectively. In documents articulating WFD's theory of change, WFD is envisaged as a capacity builder, able to provide training and technical assistance, a neutral arbiter who can draw on UK experience to foster collaboration and mutual respect between different political actors, and a relationship broker who can open the door for civil society groups seeking to engage with parliaments and political parties. The logic that underpins WFD's work with civil society is summarised in Figure 2.

WFD's strategic documents do not provide a definition of what WFD considers civil society to be, nor an explanation of which particular types of civil society are a priority for WFD. Given the elasticity of civil society's boundaries (Box 2) this may be a disadvantage. However, our broad review of WFD programmes suggests that, in practice, WFD does tend to have a particular vision of what 'good' or 'strong' civil society should look like. Typically, it is envisaged as both professional and apolitical, not in the sense that it abstains from political debate, but rather in

the sense that it advocates for policies or laws on the basis of objective evidence rather than partisan ideology. As a result, the 'problem' that WFD's programmes seek to fix is often diagnosed in terms of lack of professionalism and a lack of knowledge or experience in evidence-based advocacy. This is not so much an inherent feature of WFD's strategy, but rather is a pattern that emerges in the way that strategy is put into practice. WFD's current programme in Macedonia provides one example.

PUTTING STRATEGY INTO PRACTICE IN MACEDONIA

WFD's current programme in Macedonia – *Enhancing CSOs capacities to engage in human rights policy dialogue with decision makers and defenders* – is funded by the European Union through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. It will run over a 2-year period from 2015 to 2017, and is representative of WFD's larger civil society programmes; they are most commonly funded by sources other than WFD's core grant-in-aid from the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) and accountable grant from DFID.

BOX 2 WHAT IS CIVIL SOCIETY?

Despite – or perhaps because of – the popularity of civil society, its boundaries are often very poorly defined. Civil society is an elastic concept, and one that is sometimes stretched in several different directions. While political scientists tend to adopt a less normatively laden definition of civil society, international donors, and democracy supporters in particular, often define civil society by reference to what they think it ought to do: advocate on the behalf of citizens and hold the state accountable. This builds in a normative dimension; civil society is, by definition, cast as good for democracy. However, scholars such as Morris Fiorina have talked about the ‘dark side of civil society’ emphasising the way that it can distort the public will and promote extreme views. For the purposes of this policy paper, we define civil society – in similar terms to many others – as the sphere of un-coerced associational life that exists between the individual and the state, in which people act collectively and relatively independently of government and the market, for a variety of normative and substantive purposes.

The Macedonia programme provides a valuable illustration of how WFD’s civil society strategy is translated into a concrete intervention. Because it is a larger programme focussed on civil society it allows us to see a cross-section of the tactics that WFD employs in pursuit of its civil society strategy. As with most of its civil society programmes, WFD is delivering its support in co-operation with a local partner: the School of Journalism and Public Relations, a non-profit institution of higher professional education in Macedonia. The primary goal of the programme is to enhance the capacity of civil society organisations to engage in human rights policy dialogue with decision makers and human rights defenders. Specifically, the programme is designed to equip a group of civil society organisations with the research and evidence-based advocacy skills they need to engage with parliamentary committees and decision makers on concrete issues of their interest in the field of legislative reforms, including those related to the adoption of EU acquis – the body of common rights and obligations that is binding on all the EU member states – as Macedonia seeks to join the EU. Though the programme is ongoing, progress reports suggest it has been well-received by beneficiaries so far (Box 5).

Programme documents present a clear vision of WFD’s role. It is cast as one of helping to bridge the gap between civil society and political institutions, particularly the committees of the Assembly of the Republic of Macedonia. This will be done through the provision of training on research and advocacy, in the form of a multi-day workshop, covering issues such as research methodology, how to write policy papers, the development of advocacy strategies, and tactics for accessing decision makers. Each civil society group will be supported as it puts this training into practice, with participants being mentored as they develop and conduct new research projects, and then prepare policy papers based on that research.

Crucially, the programme is designed to help civil society build the relationships necessary to increase the impact of these policy papers. This will occur on two fronts. The first of these



Former MPs deliver training on advocacy and lobbying for CSOs in Macedonia

relates to political decisions makers. WFD will facilitate a civil society open day at the parliament, giving civil society groups an opportunity to present their research to MPs, engage in panel discussions and set up stands in the Parliament. To move past simple information transfer, WFD will facilitate meetings between civil society groups and MPs from relevant parliamentary committees, further strengthening a select number of those relationships through a study visit to the UK for a smaller group of civil society representatives and parliamentary committee chairs. The second front is the media. WFD's local partner will deliver a series of workshops, seminars and press conferences that connect participating civil society groups with journalists who report on their fields of interest, with the expectation that these journalists will write articles about the policy papers produced by civil society.

Though the Macedonia programme is targeted primarily at civil society, programme documents make it clear that WFD anticipates secondary benefits for the national legislature. They explain that, by virtue of strengthened relationships with civil society and access to the policy papers produced by the, MPs will be able to produce high quality amendments to draft legislation and hold debates within the parliament based on stronger and better researched positions. As such, while the Macedonia programme is unusual for WFD, in that it directs the bulk of its support directly to civil society, it remains consistent with WFD's overarching strategy, which identifies its support to civil society as a means of strengthening the ability of other political institutions – parliaments and political parties – to perform their democratic functions effectively.

EVALUATING WFD'S APPROACH TO CIVIL SOCIETY

No strategy is perfect, and no strategy can be perfectly implemented in practice. As in other areas, democracy support to civil society involves a number of trade-offs; all goals cannot be pursued simultaneously.⁵ Both WFD's strategic approach to civil society, and the manner in which it implements that strategy, have strengths and weaknesses. There are several windows of

opportunity, where the impact of WFD's support to civil society might be increased, as well as several risks that have the potential to undermine WFD's work if they are not confronted more effectively.

STRENGTHS

The biggest strength of WFD's approach to civil society is that it clearly, and deliberately, plays to its strengths by leveraging WFD's expertise in working with parliaments and political parties. WFD strategy recognises that the organisation is particularly well placed to help civil society groups connect with these institutions. It is, for example, able to draw on existing relationships with

BOX 3 THE ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEMOCRACY SUPPORT

Civil society plays two roles in democracy support – beneficiary and implementer – sometimes simultaneously. When civil society is a direct beneficiary of a democracy support, it receives support in several forms, including financial transfers (sometimes to fund basic operating costs, more commonly to fund specific projects or programmes of activity), capacity building (generally training to improve the knowledge and skills of staff), and material resources such as IT equipment. When civil society is the implementer of democracy support programmes, it becomes the one that delivers these benefits to others.

For example, an NGO might deliver training on human rights or gender budgeting to the members of a parliamentary committee on behalf of an organisation like WFD. In this case the civil society organisation will often benefit indirectly from the programme. If nothing else, it will be paid for undertaking the relevant activities. In parts of the world that donors perceive states to be particularly corrupt, such as sub-Saharan Africa, the belief that NGOs represent a safer and more cost effective way to deliver services means that a high proportion – in some cases a majority – of foreign aid is delivered in this way.



CSOs discuss benefits of creating a policy paper for lobbying parliament in Macedonia

BOX 4 HOW MUCH DEMOCRACY AID GOES TO CIVIL SOCIETY?

The dual roles of civil society in democracy support (Box 3) make it hard to pin down exactly how much democracy aid it receives. On average, Western (and increasingly, non-Western) governments spend about US\$10 billion on democracy support each year. However, it is difficult to work out what proportion of this benefits civil society. According to the OECD-DAC Creditor Reporting System, between 2012 and 2014 OECD-DAC donors spent more than US\$4.2 billion each year in developing countries on purposes that could be considered to fall under the banner of democracy support. Of this, more than half was spent on democratic participation and civil society, and almost a third was allocated to other purposes where civil society organisations tend to be a direct beneficiary: human rights, and women's equality organisations and institutions (see Figure 3). In addition, civil society and NGOs played a big role in delivering this aid. As Figure 4 illustrates, in 2014 civil society organisations and NGOs delivered almost three-quarters of the aid for democratic participation and civil society, more than half of the aid for human rights, and legislatures and political parties, and just under half of the aid for women's equality organisations and institutions. While Figures 3 and 4 do not capture all democracy aid (only OECD-DAC donors' expenditure in developing countries), they are likely to be roughly representative of how democracy aid is spent.

PURPOSE OF DEMOCRACY AID 2012-2014

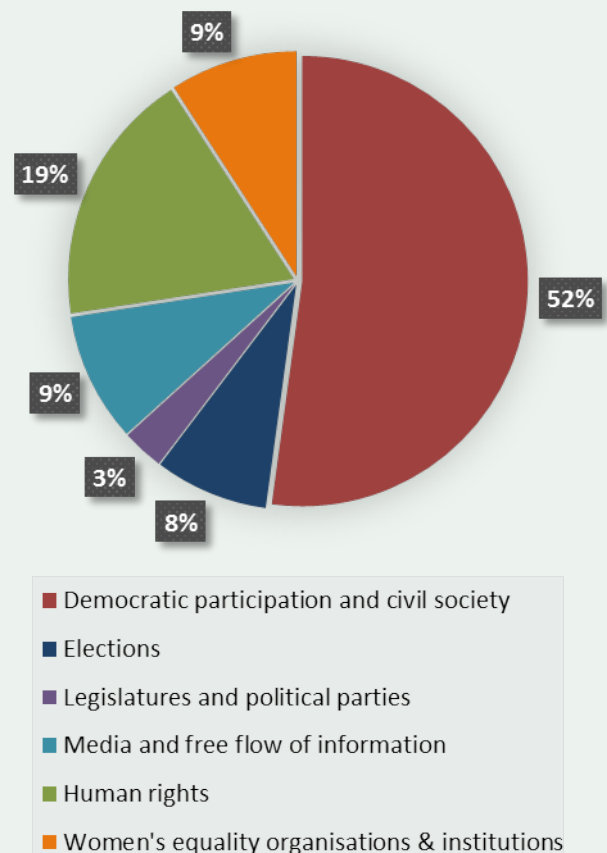


Figure 3

Source: OECD-DAC Creditor Reporting System

parliamentarians and parliamentary support staff to create spaces in which civil society actors have the opportunity to influence decision makers.

The particular value of this strength is more apparent when considered in light of existing research on civil society. While civil society was often presented as a 'magic bullet' in the 1990s, recent research makes it clear that it cannot produce sustainable political reform on its own. Rather, to be effective civil society organisations need to build relationships with other political actors, like political parties, who are in a position to push forward changes in the nature of political institutions.⁶ Evaluations commissioned by international donors also suggest that WFD's strategy accurately diagnoses one of the weaknesses of civil society as the absence of forums within which civil society can interact with these political actors, so as to build the relationships necessary to promote change. In 2012, a joint evaluation of support to civil society

engagement in policy dialogue commissioned by the aid agencies of Austria, Denmark and Sweden noted the need to establish 'invited spaces' for civil society engagement, including, 'the establishment and operationalisation of citizen participation in statutory oversight bodies such as parliamentary standing committees.'⁷

Another valuable aspect of WFD's strategy is that it engages with the contingent nature of civil society's relationship with democracy. Existing academic research emphasises that the relationship between civil society and democracy is conditional on a number of factors, and that one of them is the strength and nature of existing political institutions. As Michael Edwards explains, 'when political institutions are effective in channelling citizens' demands and enjoy broad popular legitimacy, civil society can be counted on to buttress democracy.'⁸ Where political institutions do not do this effectively, civil society may undermine rather than support democracy.

At the same time, there is evidence that the programmes of other democracy supporters, such as the EU, have a tendency to focus on civil society's role in mobilizing society, rather than its ability to interact with state and non-state actors to shape the formulation of new policies and shift the distribution of power.⁹ Considered in light of this evidence, WFD's self-identified 'niche' represents a valuable hedge against this tendency, while the tactic of investing in activities

that strengthen the institutional channels that allow civil society to have a positive rather than a negative effect on democracy support is a good one. WFD's strategy could, however, be improved by recognising this more explicitly. This would put WFD a step ahead of much of the democracy support community. Though the contingent nature of civil society's impact on democracy is reasonably well recognised in the academic community, for the most part the policies and plans of democracy supporters are overly optimistic, tending to uncritically cast civil society as inherently democratic and necessarily beneficial for democracy.

WEAKNESSES

The single greatest weakness of WFD's approach to civil society is that it tends to conflate professional, non-partisan NGOs with civil society. While in some contexts there may be good reasons for working with this sub-set of civil society (for example, where the odds of authoritarian backlash are acute), it has downsides. Specifically, it risks perpetuating a de-politicized vision of what civil society is and ought to be. In reality, many civil society organisations are not impartial or evidence-based, but are campaigning bodies established to promote a specific perspective (Box 2). Given this, it is important to recognize that there are two very different ways of trying to connect civil society to democratic institutions without generating biased outcomes.

DEMOCRACY AID DELIVERED BY NGOs/CSOs in 2014

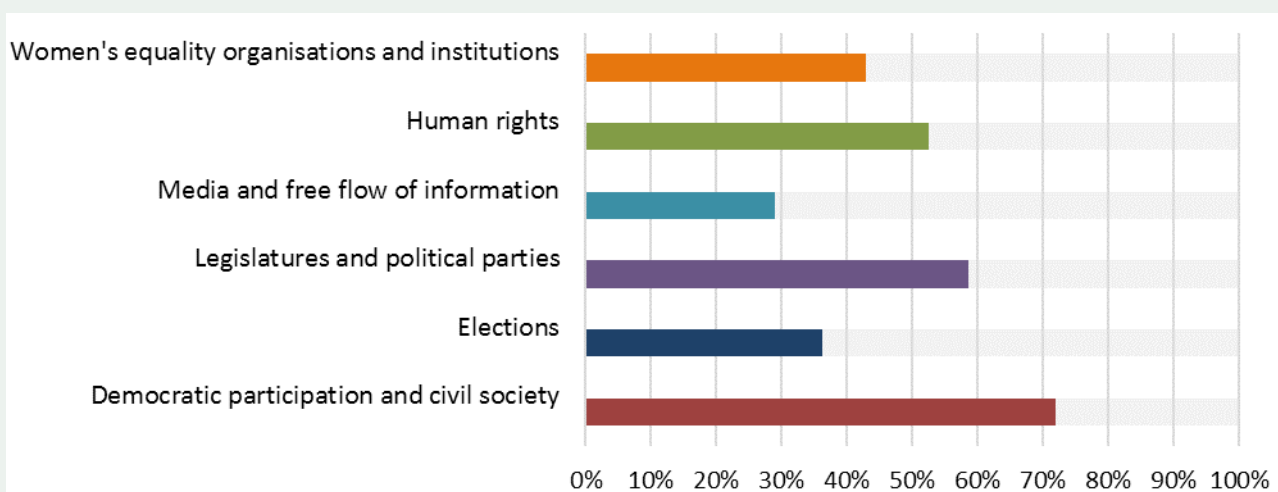


Figure 4

Source: OECD-DAC Creditor Reporting System

One is the strategy adopted by WFD: to look for, and only work with, those groups that are more impartial and research based. The other is to ensure that parties and legislatures hear from a full range of views from partial and campaigning civil society organisations.

In some ways, the latter strategy is more difficult to achieve, because it involves understanding what a balanced picture of civil society would look like, and it requires locating groups from a range of different perspectives on any given issue spectrum. It may also involve working with groups that are unsavoury, or do not fully agree with the aims of the broader project. It could also put pressure on WFD's relationships with parliaments where civil society advocates positions that are particularly critical of them. However, there would be advantages to such an approach, namely that it more effectively communicates the range of opinions within society at large, and is a better approximation to the way in which civil society engages with the political system in advanced societies. This kind of strategy could prove more effective at fostering the kinds of outcomes – particularly those relating to representation and citizen participation (Figure 2) – that WFD would like to see. This would need to be done in a balanced way so as to protect WFD's reputation as a neutral arbiter, and weighed against the potential for backlash in the particular context of each case.

WFD is by no means alone in adopting an apolitical approach. Previous research demonstrates that international donors tend to prefer working with a particular type of civil society – professionalized NGOs – and that this can produce a range of undesirable effects, including homogenization, a distortion of priorities and the erosion of connection to citizens at the grass-roots level.¹⁰ WFD is aware of these problems and sometimes takes steps to try and mitigate them. For example, it often designs programmes to ensure they include civil society groups from regional centres, hoping to cast its net beyond the relatively elite group of NGOs based in capital cities.

However, in the case of the WFD, the negative implications of focusing on a particular sub-set

of civil society is ultimately limited by the fact that civil society is primarily a means to an end – stronger parliaments and, to a lesser extent, stronger political parties – and this tends to push WFD towards working with a particular segment of civil society: the professionalized NGOs that find it easier to interact with these kinds of institutions. Significantly, this weakness is not something inherent in WFD's strategy or thinking. Rather, it is a weakness that stems from how that strategy tends to be implemented. In many programmes, including the one in Macedonia, WFD (or its local partner) relies on a competitive call for proposals to identify and select civil society participants. This inevitably favours the civil society groups, generally NGOs, which have worked out how to pitch their ideas to donors. To be fair, WFD is aware of this, and takes some steps to mitigate the problem (for example, programming staff often invest time in giving feedback to those civil society groups whose proposals were not successful) but there may be ways of improving in this area.

One option would be to reserve a certain portion of funding explicitly for less conventional advocacy groups. Another would be to provide feedback on preliminary proposals and give civil society groups time to revise their proposals before final submission. However, such a two-step process would require WFD to divert staff time and resources away from core programme activities, something that is often difficult to justify.

WINDOWS OF OPPORTUNITY

The manner in which its current strategy is implemented leaves open several windows of opportunity through which WFD can increase the impact of its support to civil society. At present, a large proportion of WFD assistance to civil society occurs within the context of a larger programme of parliamentary support (see Figure 1). Political party programmes do sometimes include work with civil society groups, but this is relatively rare (and at present, not systematically captured in WFD's records of expenditure). There is, however, scope for this to change as WFD begins to make greater use of integrated programmes that bring together legislative strengthening and political party support

through a focus on parties in parliaments. Such programmes are more likely to provide avenues through which WFD can support civil society in a way that recognises it as a political actor, rather than simply a professional source of evidence-based advice on policy or legislation. This could be trialled in selected programmes, and rolled-out more broadly once a variety of models for broader engagement are developed.

By broadening out the range of civil society organisations that it engages with to include partisan and advocacy bodies, WFD can also render its programming more inclusive while making greater use of the UK experience – a central part of its remit – by drawing on the tactics that different British institutions employ in order to ensure that they engage with a range of groups across the political spectrum. This might take the form of including a range of party, parliamentary and civil society representatives in a joint training session on international best practice in parliamentary committee inquiries and evidence-gathering sessions. Engaging simultaneously with a range of actors would help to bridge divides and to establish a common set of principles that should guide such interactions.

WFD could also borrow ideas from other democracy supporters. For example, rather than responding to polarised civil society by encouraging groups to become more professional and non-partisan, it could take the multi-party dialogue format that is often employed by the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Dialogue (NIMD) and develop an equivalent version for civil society. Instead of trying to negate or ignore political divides, NIMD's dialogue format aims to work around them by fostering tolerance and mutual respect between those at different ends of the political spectrum. In place of depoliticizing civil society, such an approach would attempt to reduce distrust and foster collaboration between adherents of rival political views. In many places, larger civil society forums already exist, but they tend to focus on service delivery in specific sectors. Perhaps more pertinently, they are often seen (by both donors and governments) as a means of getting civil society to agree on a common position, rather than means of capturing a diverse range of opinions. Indeed, in

many younger democracies, governments use disagreement within civil society as an excuse for ignoring it, asserting that it needs to speak with a common voice if it wants to be heard. While development of a common platform can be important in lobbying government, the homogenization of civil society represents a loss for democracy. Democracy supporters can help by encouraging governments to develop consultation processes that can accommodate a range of views.

These suggestions echo some of those made by others. Richard Youngs, an expert at Carnegie Europe, recently recommended that international actors balance engagement with new civil society actors who adopt confrontational positions vis-à-vis the state, with engagement with civil society actors that build bridges with the state. He emphasized that 'as part of the bridge-building focus, donors need to strengthen connections between civil society and political parties ... Initiatives aimed at tempering the mutual distrust between CSOs and parties are long overdue.'¹¹ WFD, with its two branches of operations – parliamentary strengthening and political parties – may be particularly well placed to do this. More politically oriented civil society groups could play a greater role in party support programmes, while less partisan, advocacy-focussed ones may remain more prevalent participants in parliamentary strengthening programmes.

RISKS AND THREATS

There are two important threats to the effectiveness of WFD's civil society support that are not explicitly recognised in its current strategy. One of these is the trend towards the closing of the space available for civil society to operate in, and the other is the potential for backlash, when the apparent (or anticipated) success of democracy support itself triggers increased repression by an authoritarian, or only marginally democratic, regime. These threats are related. Indeed, they are two sides of the same coin. Both are currently prominent issues in the democracy support community. Thomas Carothers recently observed, 'During the past 10 years, a startlingly large number of governments

BOX 5 WHAT DO BENEFICIARIES THINK?

A persistent problem with research on democracy support is that it tends to focus on the opinions of those who deliver democracy support programmes, rather than those who are meant to benefit from them. It is often difficult to capture what beneficiaries think about these programmes; they tend to be reluctant to criticise those who are trying to help them. In the case of WFD’s Macedonia programme, initial signs – documented by internal WFD reports – are that civil society groups view the programme in a positive light.

One activist who attended a training workshop on research skills explained how it helped them to design a better research plan; ‘The training held at the School of Journalism and Public Relations helped us define certain aspects, such as the stakeholders and the need to make interviews with them in addition to the desk research in order to obtain valid information.’

Comments made by another participant suggest that the training workshops have also improved the confidence of participants and helped them develop a clearer vision of how they want to interact with decision makers. One activist reported, ‘We now have the knowledge, skills and support provided by the mentors to conduct this research, discover the challenges and best practices, and prioritize accordingly.’



in developing and post-communist countries – by some measures more than 70 governments – have taken steps to curtail, sometimes drastically, independent civil society within their countries.’¹² A growing body of empirical evidence links this to the aid provided by international donors. One recent study found that higher aid flows increase the risk that a country will pass laws that restrict the financing of NGOs, and that this risk is even higher in the context of competitive elections.¹³ While WFD’s programme documents typically demonstrate clear recognition of the risk that parliaments will lack political will to engage with civil society, they only rarely discuss the potential risk of backlash, or the risk that support to civil society may be affected by (or even trigger) a narrowing of political space. In contrast, WFD’s political party programmes often identify this as a risk that needs to be managed. In such cases, programme activities may be deliberately kept ‘under the radar’ to avoid a government with questionable democratic credentials a means of calling the legitimacy of programme beneficiaries into question, or an excuse to curtail their activities. In the case of its support to civil society, there is scope for WFD to be more proactive in reducing these kinds of risks. Indeed, this problem is particularly acute for WFD projects that, by their very nature, seek to bring civil society into dialogue with government, and hence expose the identities of participants. In addition, WFD is well placed to encourage parliaments to act as defenders of civil society, it must avoid a tendency to reduce to this to a technical problem; it cannot simply assume that MPs are somehow unaware that proposed legislation would narrow the political space in which civil society operates.

A more effective strategy would be to recognise the role of incentives and encourage those who implement programmes to identify ways of showing parliamentarians what they stand to gain from protecting civil society. This would represent an extension of existing programmes, rather than something entirely new. Current WFD work often aims to build trust between MPs and civil society, while demonstrating to MPs that civil society can be a useful source of information and policy options, but do not expressly link this to the defence of civil society. Experience suggests making such a link explicit could generate

considerable gains. In Kenya, for example, activists and donors seeking to mobilise legislators against voting for a bill that threatened to restrict the amount of foreign funding that NGOs could receive pointed out to legislators that one outcome of this measure would be to curtail important education and healthcare facilities in their constituencies.¹⁴ Partly as a result, a majority of MPs voted against the proposals, and in doing so effectively protected NGOs against punitive regulations that were widely understood to have been designed to punish those civil society actors that had promoted the prosecution of President Uhuru Kenyatta for crimes against humanity at The Hague.

IMPLICATIONS FOR OTHER DEMOCRACY SUPPORTERS

Though WFD's strategy positions it in a particular niche with respect to civil society, few (if any) of the problems that it faces in implementing that strategy are unique. As such, many of the points discussed above have implications for other democracy supporters. WFD is by no means the only democracy promoter to pursue its goals by strengthening the ability of civil society groups to conduct evidence-based advocacy. In 2012, the aid agencies of Austria, Denmark and Sweden commissioned a joint evaluation of support to civil society engagement in policy dialogue. Drawing on case studies from Bangladesh, Mozambique and Uganda, that evaluation reported that 'providing evidence-based research is a key 'entry point strategy' for support to civil society.'¹⁵ The report's authors explained that independent research and evidence was often lacking, but in demand from government agencies and politicians, creating windows of opportunity for civil society groups able to provide such research. The report encouraged donors to invest in building the capacity of civil society to systematically generate research and evidence as a way of raising their profile and lobbying for policy change.

It is therefore not surprising that the discrepancy between WFD strategy – which talks about civil society in broad terms, without indicating a preference for any particular type – and the implementation of that strategy – which

gravitates towards work with professionalized, apolitical NGOs – is emblematic of a wider gap that exists between the civil society policies of international donors and the manner in which those ideas are put into practice. A recent review of the civil society strategies of bilateral and multilateral donors observed that, almost without exception, donors have adopted far more inclusive understandings of the term 'civil society' than those that prevailed 10 or 15 years ago. As that report put it, 'All donors now acknowledge that the term includes other associational forms, including trade unions, "traditional" associational groups, and faith-based groups.'¹⁶ Yet that report also hints at persistent gaps between policy and practice. Other research has made this point more explicitly, leading some to observe that despite the rhetoric of inclusion the current aid architecture continues to prioritize a particular type of organisational structure, built around formal, professionalized organisations.¹⁷ DFID's Civil Society Partnership Review, released in November 2016, also highlighted this issue.¹⁸ It observed that grassroots organisations, such as smaller local NGOs and faith-based groups, are often better positioned to achieve lasting impact, acknowledging that DFID needed to become better at engaging with a diverse range of civil society actors.

In light of this, our analysis of WFD's approach to civil society suggests that democracy supporters generally need to do two things. The first thing they should do is to make greater efforts to critically assess and clearly identify which types of civil society they are seeking to support.

The second thing they should do is to be alert to ways in which the practicalities of programme implementation can limit the range of civil society actors they work with. It is not possible, nor necessary, for all democracy supporters to engage with all types of civil society all of the time. Some will adopt a portfolio approach, engaging with different types of civil society organisations across different programmes. Some democracy supporters will have a particular strength in working with a certain type of civil society organisation. The Labour Party's international office is, for example, able to draw on more experience in working with trade-unions than

WFD's parliamentary strengthening teams. The point is to make sure that when a decision is reached to focus on particular parts of civil society it is made consciously and for good reasons. Once this is done routinely, it will be easier for donors and agencies to coordinate to make sure that, between them, a range of civil society groups are supported.

Part of the reason civil society appeals to democracy supporters is because it appears to offer a way of influencing the political trajectories of foreign countries without overtly engaging with domestic politics. It provides (or perhaps more accurately, was thought to provide) a shield against accusations that donors are 'playing politics.' Yet it is increasingly clear that this shield is not effective. WFD, with its expertise in working with very political institutions – parliaments and political parties – is well placed to help the democracy support community tackle the challenge of developing new tactics for engaging with a broader range of civil society organisations. The starting point will be to recognize that civil society organisations are inherently political, but that this does not have to be a barrier to designing balanced and sensitive interventions.

As noted above, more inclusive strategies for supporting civil society do generate risks. There is growing evidence that as external support for civil society grows, so too does the risk that authoritarian incumbents will retaliate, employing a variety of tactics to close political space. Broadening the kinds of civil society that donors support could exacerbate this risk, but always taking the safe option might also prove counterproductive. Playing it safe all the time will leave us with an impoverished version of civil society and a superficial form of democracy. Democracy supporters cannot work with all types of civil society all the time; to attempt this would be both impractical and foolhardy. They can, however, look to find ways to let civil society be itself whenever this is possible.

FURTHER READING

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ENDNOTES

- 1 These are discussed in greater depth in Andrew T. Green and Richard D. Kohl, 'Challenges of Evaluating Democracy Assistance: Perspectives from the Donor Side', *Democratization* 14, no. 1 (2007): 151–65.
- 2 Peter Burnell, 'From Evaluating Democracy Assistance to Appraising Democracy Promotion', *Political Studies* 56, no. 2 (2008): 414–34.
- 3 Marina Ottaway and Thomas Carothers, *Funding Virtue: Civil Society Aid and Democracy Promotion* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), 4.
- 4 Andrew Tesoriere and William Robinson, 'Triennial Review: Westminster Foundation for Democracy' (London, March 2015), 30.
- 5 Susan Dodsworth and Nic Cheeseman, 'Navigating Trade-Offs in Parliamentary Strengthening', Policy Paper (London: Westminster Foundation for Democracy and Global Partners & Associates, 2016), http://www.wfd.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/WFD_A4_Navigating-Trade_Offs_v5.1.pdf.
- 6 See, for example Meredith Weiss, *Protest and Possibilities: Civil Society and Coalitions for Political Change in Malaysia* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006).
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- 10 Jelmer Kamstra and Lau Schulpen, 'Worlds Apart But Much Alike: Donor Funding and the Homogenization of NGOs in Ghana and Indonesia', *Studies in Comparative International Development* 50, no. 3 (4 November 2014): 331–57.
- 11 Richard Youngs, 'Rethinking Civil Society and Support for Democracy' (Stockholm: EBA, 2015), 43.
- 12 Thomas Carothers, 'Closing Space and Fragility', Policy Brief (Washington D.C.: Fragility Study Group, October 2016), 1.
- 13 See Kendra Dupuy, James Ron, and Aseem Prakash, 'Hands Off My Regime! Governments' Restrictions on Foreign Aid to Non-Governmental Organisations in Poor and Middle-Income Countries', *World Development* 84 (August 2016): 299–311.
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- 16 Janice Giffen and Ruth Judge, 'Civil Society Policy and Practice in Donor Agencies' (Oxford: INTRAC, 2010), 7.
- 17 Nicola Banks, David Hulme, and Michael Edwards, 'NGOs, States, and Donors Revisited: Still Too Close for Comfort?', *World Development* 66 (February 2015): 707–18.
- 18 The Review is available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/international-development-secretary-launches-civil-society-partnership-review>.