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Donors, rights-based approaches and implications for global citizenship: a case study from Peru

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Introduction

How far can foreign governments go in supporting the realization of the rights of citizens of other countries? The country programmes of most bilateral aid agencies are hesitating to move from declaration to implementation of rights-based approaches. Nevertheless, innovation and enterprise flourish on the margins of the mainstream. It is here we must look for efforts to put declarations into practice. This chapter explores the challenges and risks facing a foreign aid agency when it seeks to do so. Based on interviews with the staff concerned, and illustrated with four examples from a broader range of efforts, this is the story of a small country office on the periphery of a large bilateral international aid programme: the Peru office of the UK Department for International Development (DFID).

In each and every aspect of their work, the Peru team consistently takes a rights-based approach to an extent that I have not met anywhere else in DFID. The team's effort reveals difficult issues concerning the legitimacy of action: the practice of power and lines of accountability. Illuminating these dilemmas and challenges may help development agencies contribute to an inclusive world order based on transnational notions of rights and social justice.

The Department for International Development in Peru

A bilateral aid agency such as DFID is part of a foreign, sovereign government. It provides financial and technical aid to governments of recipient countries through projects, programmes or budgetary support. It may also fund civil society activities, although perhaps preferring to

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channel this support through the intermediary of its own non-governmental organizations (NGOs) back home to avoid accusations of too direct an involvement in local politics (Eyben 2003b). Although the UK had been providing small amounts of aid to Peru for many years, it only opened an office in Lima in early 2000. With a total staff of seven, it is one of DFID's smallest offices, located in a continent on the periphery of DFID's interest.¹ It has adopted the unusual practice in DFID of employing senior national advisers working on equal terms with those recruited in Britain. It manages direct funding to both government and civil society programmes.

In the three to four years of its existence, this office has witnessed a dynamic and sometimes turbulent political process. Fujimori was president of Peru for a period of ten years, during which time his administration became increasingly centralized and authoritarian. Most institutions were co-opted to the regime – through bribery, blackmail or force – including Congress, the judiciary, the armed forces, much of the media and a swathe of civil society organizations, including the popular organizations used for disbursing social assistance programmes. Following Fujimori's flight in November 2000, a caretaker government paved the way for elections that brought in President Toledo in July 2001 and what the DFID office described as the 'democratic spring'. Thereafter, the office began to observe the re-emergence of long-established structures of conservatism and patronage.²

In its first year, and Fujimori's last, the DFID office established contact with the Peruvian academy and civil society, including human rights activists and champions of social justice. Later, during the 'democratic spring', many of these academics and activists joined the administration. DFID was encouraged by the compatibility of their agenda with its own approach to development. Thus, despite its relative paucity of staff and money, the office believed it could help shape a more inclusive and substantive democracy, informed by poor people's struggles to realize their social, economic and cultural, as well as their civil and political, rights.

The realization of rights is the conceptual lens through which DFID Peru pursues its central goal of strengthening state–society relations. This means supporting the state to become more accountable and responsive to its citizens – particularly those with the least power and the most excluded – while at the same time helping citizens' organizations develop the interest and capacity to engage with state institutions rather than confront, disregard or serve them as clients. The office developed a strategy informed by the political science literature on clientelism and citizenship in Latin America.³ It also commissioned

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literature reviews and think-pieces from Peruvian social scientists and policy analysts to ground its work in a contextual understanding. It saw it was engaged in efforts to change deep structural relationships between state and society, established at the time of the Spanish conquest, and resulting in the absence of a shared vision of Peruvian society. It noted the cyclical nature of democratic moments followed by authoritarian regimes. It identified the antagonism between authoritarian and democratic tendencies running through all social life, including the low self-esteem of poor people in Peru associated with the belief that they themselves are not capable of changing their situation but are dependent on a providential leader, thus encouraging the authoritarian tendency (IEP 2003).

A paper commissioned from Francisco Sagasti (2002) distinguished between the long-term, contextual factors that change only slowly, and medium-term, institutional factors that influence the extent and direction of structural change. Examples of the latter include the extension of the franchise to women and illiterate citizens, universal and compulsory primary education, agrarian reform, the growth of the informal urban economy and substantial migration to the cities, and the economic reforms associated with the opening up of markets. Sagasti argued that foreign aid could be most effective in supporting these medium-term changes.

Lastly, the office analysed how and with whom it could promote non-party political action in favour of the realization of poor people's rights. Who makes and shapes policy, and how can DFID influence that process? Iteratively it has looked for allies within the research community, in human rights organizations and among leaders in the urban working class. It commissioned a study on elites on the premise that they may be significant agents of change (IEP 2003) and discovered that elites in Peru do not exist in any coherent sense of the word. It learned that it is rather the middle classes that may be the key agents of progressive change.

Bilateral aid and rights-based approaches

Rights-based approaches are increasingly part of the policy and practice of international development agencies (Eyben 2003a). While recognizing the importance of the internationally agreed normative framework, DFID policy and practice focus on the integration of principles of equality, inclusion, participation and empowerment into a global goal of poverty reduction (DFID 2000a). The meaning and importance of rights-based approaches are often disputed within an agency, and official