

## **APPENDIX FIVE**

### **WHO OWNS THE GIFT? DONOR –RECIPIENT RELATIONS AND THE NATIONAL ELECTIONS IN BOLIVIA**

Rosalind Eyben and Rosario León

#### **INTRODUCTION**

What is aid? Is it a gift or an entitlement? To whom does it belong and who should receive it? Staff working for donor and recipient governments in countries such as Bolivia constantly reformulate and re-interpret their answers to these questions in multiple encounters and struggles over roles and responsibilities. The interpretational struggle is performed through daily encounters with others in the country, such as leaders of social movements, NGO staff, consultants financed by donors, and ministers of the recipient government. There are also those whose role tends to be off-stage. These include the donors' head offices back home in the capital cities; in the recipient country it is the head of government, the President and his entourage, the military and the police forces and the party politicians, as well as perhaps those with the least influence in this debate, the *raison d'être* of the whole enterprise, poor people.

What follows is the story of one such struggle over the ownership of aid, a struggle not only of reason but also of emotions, one that involved both not only trust but also treachery, not only friendship but also rivalry. . It is a story in which we ourselves were significant actors. Eyben was the head of the country office of the British aid programme in Bolivia and also in that office primarily responsible for DFID's initial support to the Bolivian election process before she left the country in early June 2002. León, a Bolivian sociologist, was working as a consultant, first to DFID and then to the management consortium that administered a donor-funded project.<sup>1</sup> It is hard to be dispassionate about a story that involved both of us so intensely and led to deep reflection on the nature of donor- recipient relations. Rather than hide our biases we hope that, by telling the story as we experienced it, we will be contributing to an evolving understanding of the significance of the inter-play of personal and organisational relationships in explaining how aid works.

#### **SETTING THE SCENE**

##### **The donor perspective**

In June 2001 Eyben was well into her second year as social development adviser for the Department of International Development (DFID) in Bolivia and Peru and head of the DFID office in Bolivia. Both offices were exploring and testing the room for manoeuvre for an official donor organisation in countries that were not a priority for

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<sup>1</sup> We have given pseudonyms to the development agencies in this story, namely Elyria, Redmark and Frumland and to the staff of these agencies that played a part in our story.

our head office and where we had relatively small budgets and little influence with the recipient governments.

When the offices were established in early 2000 the situation in the two countries was very different. Bolivia, the smaller and poorer of the two, was heavily dependent on aid. In the preceding fifteen years its government had adopted all the donor recommendations: structural adjustment, privatisation of state-owned industries and services, reduction in tariff barriers, civil service reform and investment in the social sectors. Furthermore, since 1997 following the democratic election to the presidency of one of Bolivia's former dictators, General Banzer, the government was committed to following the United State's wishes concerning the eradication of coca cultivation. It was an 'exemplary' country, admired by all parts of the donor community, comparable to such favourites as Uganda.

Peru, a larger country, much less dependent on foreign aid, was, on the other hand, seen to have problems. President Fujimori had fallen out of favour with donors. He had changed the constitution to allow him to stand for election a third time in April 2000. Seven months later the government collapsed and a transitional administration announced new elections for April 2001. Donors in Peru were eager to provide support to ensure a free and fair election. DFID was particularly interested in supporting those working with local organisations in the most remote and poorest regions of Peru. With very little time to put a project together the DFID office in Peru quickly hired a project manager and offered funds to half a dozen non governmental organisations (NGOs) to help poor people become 'informed voters'. The money was spent; the election commission was happy with DFID's efforts and altogether the project seemed a relatively pain-free success.

In Bolivia elections were due to take place one year later, in June 2002. Since the re-establishment of democracy in 1982 the five yearly elections appeared to have been conducted in a fair and free manner. As there appeared not to be a problem that needed help, donors were not giving the issue much consideration. Their minds were rather focused on Bolivia's latest exemplary efforts. Bolivia was the first country to establish a Comprehensive Development Framework for donor-recipient relations and was also in the advance guard of highly indebted poor countries to produce a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper to secure debt relief.<sup>2</sup>

The lead responsibility for both of these achievements was with the Vice-Ministry for Public Investment and External Assistance in the Ministry of Finance. Always referred to by its acronym, 'VIPFE' enthusiastically supported the new donor emphasis on 'national ownership' and the requirement that the recipient government, not the donor, be 'in the driving seat'. June 2001 was a high point for VIPFE, Jacking the moment when the Boards of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) formally endorsed the PRSP. From the donor perspective, DFID had played a significant role in the process that had led up to this endorsement. It had taken the lead in establishing and convening a group of the representatives of all the official bilateral aid agencies in the country with the aim of securing a PRSP that reflected our concerns and would thus allow them to subsequently finance its implementation

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<sup>2</sup> For more information about the Bolivian CDF see the World Bank evaluation (2003); for different views on the PRSP see IMF (2002) and Christian Aid (2002?)

(Eyben 2004). One of the concerns that DFID brought to this group – and to VIPFE – was structural social exclusion as an obstacle to poverty reduction.

Meanwhile, as Eyben made some low key enquiries as to the next year's elections and explained what DFID had done in Peru, she discovered what appeared to be an essential difference between the two countries. This was the extent to which people were registered to vote. Whereas this had not appeared to be much of a problem in Peru, where the Fujimori regime had actively sought poor people's votes in exchange for populist food aid and public works schemes, in Bolivia an unknown number of people were thought to be without identity cards and thus without the right to vote. While she was pondering on this, Rosario León, someone whom she knew by repute but had never met arrived in her office.

### **The political disenchantment**

In 2001 León had concluded her role in charge of the Bolivian component of the Forests Trees and People Programme (FTPP) of the FAO, after 11 years of work. The FTPP was a global program with regional components in each continent. This experience had encouraged her develop a participatory approach of facilitation and respectful relationships in the construction of development programmes. When the programme came to an end León returned to her non-governmental policy research institute, CERES, of which she has been a member since 1981. CERES is committed to the pursuit of social justice and like all doing social research in Bolivia is entirely dependent on foreign financing for its programme of work, having to persuade donors to support programmes that the researchers believe are important

León's return to CERES occurred at a time in which civil society, particularly NGOs, was exploring how to overcome the political disenchantment increasingly evident in Bolivian society.

Bolivian NGOs themselves were in crisis. Since 1993 their historical position of intellectuals at the service of social justice, democracy, social change, and development of knowledge, had become reduced in the majority of cases to one of providers of services and implementers of policy on behalf of the state bureaucracy and funded by international development agencies.

The shortage of resources for NGOs to fight against poverty and nurture democracy confirmed their feelings of impotency, dependency, domination and exclusion when they saw how the donors closed a circle of negotiations with the bureaucratic and technocratic elites, with very few spaces opened at the request of civil society. Through Bolivia's Comprehensive Development Framework (the *Nuevo Marco*) were created codes of interaction and conditions of accessibility to external financing that were little known or understood by those outside that circle.

The NGOs had neither resources nor political means to influence the shaping of the new configuration between government and development aid. Rather they were recruited as consultants to produce knowledge for the purpose of validating the policy proposals of the bureaucracy. This created feelings of frustration and inspired actions to call attention to and reject the new order established in donor-recipient relations in which donors appeared to be playing a too powerful role in shaping and implementing policy..

The loss of illusions, the hope to change the conditions of exclusion, the feelings of impotency and disenchantment with the forms of doing politics, had also influenced many others in Bolivian society.

In mid 2001 Bolivia was preparing for its 2002 general elections with everything that this implies in Bolivia. As usual in the run up to an election different interest groups were mobilized to provide evidence for the existence of their demands and to pressure the government to overcome the extremes of the economic crisis. However, this time was something could be felt in the air and heard on the streets of La Paz and other cities of the country. This was the distrust of the political electoral game, the distrust of the political class, the citizen's indifference to what an electoral process signified. People on the streets would say:

“Nothing changes, it's the same ‘chola’ with a different skirt”,<sup>3</sup>

“It's the same ones as always with the same tricks”,

“Once more the politicians will use us for their own ends”.

It seemed that only the politicians and a few others still told themselves the tale of democracy and the electoral process with any enthusiasm. The country had reached dangerous levels of disenchantment with the electoral process. This, combined with the economic crisis had created a situation of dangerous political destabilization, thus one less favorable for development action.

The crisis was felt overwhelmingly, not only in the rural areas, but also by the middle classes and it was not believed that the current form of doing politics was the solution. Unemployment, low salaries, the decline of the amount of money in circulation, the decline of household consumption, the slow application of legal reforms concerning land and property and other rights of indigenous and rural people, the overwhelming debt of the small borrower, the increase of tariffs on basic services, and the reduced international support towards microfinance and productive processes in rural areas all added up to create a feeling of impotency and frustration.

The National Dialogue of 2000 in preparation for Bolivia's Poverty Reduction Strategy may have even increased the frustration of poor people and those less privileged because the outcome remained at the level of planning and the development of action plans that were never implemented. The roadblocks and the long marches by the poor and other actors, excluded from state decision-making, did not create the best environment for the electoral process and the strengthening of democracy in Bolivia. However, these social battles in the streets and in the rural areas broke the sense of ‘anomie’ in which the majority of Bolivians lived in those days.

The state failed to respond. The whole architecture of participatory institutions and institutional norms did not help overcome the permanent impoverishment of many social services, nor did it tackle the social exclusion that is reproduced through the administrative management of the state, the instruments of politics and its styles of implementation. The almost perfect democratic machinery, operated by elitist,

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<sup>3</sup> ‘Chola’ is a Bolivian woman of highland indigenous origin who dresses in a long voluminous skirt, with a shawl and bowler hat.

clientelist and patrimonial political habits, was challenged once again, after many years, by the emergence of social struggles, social mobilizations, and sociopolitical conflicts between diverse interest groups, particularly inspired by the demand for political, economic and cultural rights. How is it possible to maintain the continual modernization of political institutions without changing political habits and the political culture?

The diagnosis of political scientists, and the ‘messages’ of “a-systemic” parties, as the indigenous and non-elitist political expressions became to be called, signaled the necessity to recognize the rights of permanently excluded populations, of listening to the voices of the invisible, of broadening the system of political representation, of understanding the causes of absence and abstention from the electoral system which went beyond an analysis of electoral preferences. And the NGOs that worked in rural areas with populations at social extremes understood this. Only the politicians and a few others still told themselves the tale of democracy and the electoral process with any enthusiasm

In this context, searching for a way out of the crisis, as well as allies to develop a different work, León visited various government offices and donor agencies without securing any positive response. León’s eleven years with FAO had left her outside the circle of known consultants. During that time she had worked with more than 50 grass roots throughout the whole country but when the time came to negotiate support for a more inclusive election process it appeared as if she did not know the country. The development agencies and the manner of negotiating had changed much in the last years and donors already had their known and trusted ‘clients’ to whom they listened and provided funds.

After considerable insistence from León the secretary of the head of the DFID office eventually gave her an appointment with Eyben three months after León’s original request.

## **SUPPORTING A MORE INCLUSIVE ELECTION PROCESS**

### **Exclusion: a legitimate donor concern?**

The increasing social and political unrest in Bolivia over the last few years had led to *exclusion* becoming an acceptable topic for donors to discuss with government, although not one received with enthusiasm. While the term ‘social exclusion’ had only recently become common usage, most Bolivian scholars would understand it as fundamental to their modern history. Today, exclusion has become primarily associated with cultural and ethnic identity, as well as with economic inequality.<sup>4</sup>

The extent to which Bolivia has achieved substantive democracy remains questionable (Whitehead, 2000) Although none of Bolivia’s mainstream political parties have policies aligned to broad social movements, each of them have

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<sup>4</sup> Although Bolivia just falls within the definition of a middle-income country, with an average per capita income of US\$ 1,030 it has the sixth highest level of income inequality in the world [UNDP Human Development Report 2001]

organisational structures reaching down to local level to 'mobilise' votes, including through the use of patronage. Political activism is often seen more as a means to personal or community benefits (jobs in the public sector, contracts, public works) than as a means to influence policy through democratic procedures. Demonstrations, road blockades, hunger strikes and other forms of direct action appeared to be more effective in gaining concessions and policy change from government and public sector institutions. By 2001 the leaders of the strikes and demonstrations were gaining greater popularity and their recently established marginalised political parties, particularly that of the leader of the coca growers, were becoming more prominent. They could be seen as a potential threat to the cosy parliamentary arrangements of what Bolivians refer to as 'the political class' whom the staff of VIPFE served.

The preamble to Bolivia's Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) notes that 18 years of democracy and 15 years of structural adjustment have not opened the doors to the elimination of social exclusion nor sufficiently reduced poverty. The PRSP states that this is a challenge requiring co-responsibility of both state and society. The fight against social exclusion is thus conceived as an opportunity for the development of citizenship, since without citizens who are conscious of their rights and obligations, combating poverty will be difficult. [Government of Bolivia 2001]

The actual content of the PRSP, as distinct from its preamble, was significantly weaker as to the government's intentions concerning social exclusion. Noticeably missing were any proposals for development of government and civil society capacity for the systematic assessment of the differential impact of public policy, programmes and services on different sections of the population. Nor were there any proposals to enhance the representation of excluded groups in political life and public service. There was the impression that the issue was included to satisfy the requirements of the donor community. That DFID had gained a reputation for being interested in the matter did not, in the eyes of VIPFE, necessarily mean that DFID should support activities to which VIPFE did not accord priority. This was where there lay the seeds of future disagreements.

### **The new partnership of the CDF**

The theme of the PRSP and the associated Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) was that the recipient government decided priorities for poverty reduction and the donors supported these. The 'bad old days' of donor-led initiatives and donor-inspired projects would no longer be acceptable. Democratically elected governments were those with the legitimacy to decide on public expenditure and donor money would only be welcome if it were integrated into the public expenditure decision-making process. DFID's policy, as established in London, was to support this line with enthusiasm and to encourage 'laggards' in the donor community to follow suit.

In theory this new 'partnership' approach did not preclude donors from funding NGOs and other organisations in civil society. They were officially included in the CDF matrix as drawn up in Washington by the World Bank. In practice, this issue had not been resolved in Bolivia but rather an unwritten and not discussed *modus vivendi* had been established. This was based on the fiction that bilateral donors provided government to government aid and that private citizens in aid-giving

countries, through northern NGOs, supported civil society in aid recipient countries. It was a fiction because most of these northern NGOs were heavily reliant (in some cases 100% reliant) on funding from their government and the money was counted by that government as part of its Official Development Assistance (ODA). Some of the donors most enthusiastic about the government being in the driving seat were providing substantial funds to Bolivian civil society in this way and on a long term basis. DFID was the exception in that it had no such provision, other than some funding going through the Embassy's small grants scheme and through the centrally financed Civil Society Challenge Fund<sup>5</sup>

This comfortable arrangement between VIPFE and the donors appeared to Eyben not only hypocritical but injurious to donors' potential to support the PRSP. As the PRSP preamble had noted, poverty reduction could not be achieved without joined up efforts by state and society. Yet donors themselves were maintaining two streams of funding relations which, Eyben thought could only encourage rather than reduce the breach between state and society. It was just this breach that the DFID offices in Peru and Bolivia had interpreted as being the fundamental problem of the Andean region where there were very high levels of income inequality in countries which on an aggregate basis enjoyed middle-income status. Thus it was proposed that the focus of DFID's work would be to support state and society actors achieve an increased mutual comprehension of their respective roles and responsibilities in the identification, implementation and monitoring of policies for poverty reduction (DFID, 2002:9). Through a single budget, DFID would openly fund both government and civil society programmes as an expression of this focus. Support to next year's elections would be a case in point.

### **Designing the election project: who owned the process ?**

When the date arrived for the meeting between León and Eyben, León had various issues she wanted to discuss, but had been informed by the secretary that she had only ten minutes. In her prior conversations with staff in other donor agencies León had always left, disappointed that the theme of exclusion was no longer on their agenda. But this was a special situation. She had waited for three months because it was said among development circles that something special was happening at DFID; there was an unusual readiness to hear the voice of civil society and to support principles of social participation and themes related to the rights of the poor.

León decided to speak directly and forcefully in DFID about her concerns for what was happening. She told her she was profoundly disturbed by the invisibility of many people in Bolivia and that they did not even have the right to be part of- and actually were not part of their country. In the eyes of the state they did not exist. They were the people who could not participate in the election and thus change the way democracy played out in Bolivia.

León was surprised that unlike some of her prior meetings with donors, Eyben did not denigrate this issue so as to establish on which side of the table sat the power. Rather

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<sup>5</sup> For a lengthier discussion of this point and the importance of the NGO constituency in donor countries see Eyben 2003.

across the table she saw an enthusiastic face and doubted her own eyesight. Eyben told León about her concerns on the matter and commented briefly of her experience in Peru. We talked for more than 45 minutes. After this meeting León was invited to do a consultancy assignment on this issue but she felt the outcome was positive not only for that reasons but the way in which the relations were developing.

So León had joined the circle of the favoured ‘few’ who received contracts from donor agencies. To justify this to herself she felt she had to something that would be really useful for the ‘many’.

### **Could we copy the Peruvian model?**

DFID support to the elections in Bolivia would have to be designed rather differently than in Peru because of the different context of donor-recipient relations. In Peru there was little interest on either the recipient or donor side in co-ordinating and/or harmonising donor financing. The overall flow of aid was proportionately much less than in Bolivia and the number of donors was also fewer. At the same time the transitional government was welcoming all and any support to strengthening human rights in the post-Fujimori epoch and had no problems with DFID identifying, designing, selecting the NGOs it wanted to support and then funding and managing a discrete project. Such an approach in Bolivia would appear very strange and unwelcome. The option had to be for civil society organisations interested in the elections to come together on their own initiative and then for them to approach donors for support. They had to ‘own’ the process. How could we get them to own something which they did know had the potential to exist?

The answer appeared to lay in telling them what DFID had done in Peru and using that as a means for stimulating a request for us to fund something similar in Bolivia. This would obviously take more time but at that stage we were still a year away from the elections. It seemed a good entry point for starting the ball rolling. If DFID organised a seminar in which they brought up to La Paz representatives from some of the civil society organisations they had funded in Peru, it might stimulate an interest and a demand for something similar in Bolivia.

### **Doing the groundwork**

We needed to do some groundwork. First we had to identify those organisations in civil society who had been involved in some way or the other in the previous elections of 1997 so as to know who to invite to the seminar. Second we had to assure ourselves there was sufficient money likely to be available should the demand be forthcoming. DFID alone did not have enough resources available to fund a project of any size. More importantly, unlike Peru, in Bolivia there was rapidly developing a tradition of donor coordination, putting money into a common basket for supporting an agreed programme or activity. A stand alone project funded just by DFID would contravene cutting edge practice. It would also over-expose DFID in what might prove to be a fairly risky enterprise with political ramifications. Unlike Peru where party politics had disappeared under Fujimori, and civil society could appear neutral, any civil society organisation or NGO leader in Bolivia was likely to have informal affiliations with a political party.

León and Eyben agreed that the first priority was to find out who might be interested in becoming involved. León was contracted by DFID to map the NGO and social



organization networks established in the country and who were working on issues of exclusion and voice. It was interesting to observe the frustration and feeling of impotency of many of those León interviewed in relation to their current difficulties in tackling exclusion and their enthusiasm to find new ways to do so. The issue of identity cards would immediately come up. It was an issue that revealed the existence of many outside the civil life of the Bolivian state and which, in the circumstances of an election meant the political exclusion of citizens in both rural areas and the cities.

Another factor constantly mentioned in the interviews was the behavior of donors. These supported parallel and diverse activities, creating competition among the NGOs for securing financing. At the same time the grass roots organisations interviewed commented on the state's abandonment of the communities where they lived and worked, joking: "Now during election season, gifts will start coming into the rural areas so that the poor people will vote for one or the other party." But then they quickly added that the time had come for people to vote for themselves, rather than for the politicians.

León discovered more than 50 Bolivian civil society organisations in the country that had an interest and experience in education on citizens' rights and obligations. The study found that the work of these organisations was diminished by the fact that their efforts were isolated and the resources aimed at promoting greater citizen participation were scattered. Nevertheless there was a keen interest among a number of these organisations to join their efforts into a more strategic approach. How was this to be achieved?

While León was mapping the civil society actors, Eyben was making the rounds in La Paz, testing out if the environment were sufficiently favourable to proceed with the seminar. To enhance her respectability she asked the deputy head of mission in the British Embassy to accompany her on visits to the President of the National Electoral Court ( an independent body established under the constitution to run elections) and to the Ombudswoman who had a broad mandate to promote and protect human rights. The first was not very interested being very pre-occupied with the problems of how to actually run the elections with an inadequate staff and insufficient funds. The Ombudswoman was more enthusiastic and concerned about a more inclusive election process. She was aware that there might be people without identity cards and even those who could vote might lack the knowledge for an informed decision. She gave the effort her general blessing.

On that basis Eyben approached other donors and enquired as to whether in principle they would like to join a basket fund in support of civil society efforts at voter education. She started with the donor agency, Elyria with whom DFID shared globally a common strong commitment to donor coordination. Matthew, a senior expatriate governance specialist in the Elyrian office explained that they were already designing a small project with one of the independent political think tanks in Bolivia to look into the issue of who voted and what information they received. Although their project did not have the social exclusion focus of DFID, there appeared to be sufficient common ground to make it worthwhile our joining forces, provided the think tank could continue to play a leading role. Redmark shared DFID's interests in social exclusion and also indicated that they would like to join the initiative. But what was it we were exactly thinking of doing? The three donors found themselves drafting

a project document as the means to establish some common agreement as to the objectives of a more inclusive election process. We also agreed the amount of money that we could put into the common pot. *Ironically, for a project that was meant to be owned by civil society, we had apparently already firmly set the parameters.* This draft project document accompanied the letter of invitation to a seminar sent out by the three donors to the civil society organisations identified through Leon's mapping exercise

It was difficult to draft the invitation letter. We stressed the exchange of experiences with Peru; we indicated that we had already received some indications from civil society that they would like donor funding to support greater citizen participation in the elections and we stressed that despite our having drafted a project document, the parameters of the project had not been set. To secure greater legitimacy we noted that the national electoral commission and the Ombudswoman's office would be participating in the seminar. With some nervousness Eyben copied the letter to VIPFE on the grounds of providing them with information concerning our intentions to fund civil society, but *not* asking permission to do so.

VIPFE reacted more angrily than we had anticipated. A very strong letter was written by the Vice-Minister accusing us, particularly DFID, who was in the lead in the matter, of breaking the principles of the Comprehensive Development Framework and designing a 'donor-led' project. It was the responsibility of the government, said the letter, as to how donor money should be spent, and we should not have made this decision to go ahead without VIPFE's agreement. As we had already burnt our boats we continued with the seminar but Matthew was nervous. We agreed that somehow he and I had to persuade Jack, the head of the Elyria office in La Paz to become more strongly supportive, and particularly to capitalise on his good personal relations with the key staff member in VIPFE, Joanna. Jack and Joanna and their families often went on Sunday picnics together in the countryside around La Paz.

### **Establishing a civil society consortium**

At the first seminar we had invited not only the organisations identified through the mapping exercise but also some of Bolivia's leading intellectuals, two feminist members of parliament, some representatives of the press and staff from the election commission and ombudswoman's office. A specialist in participatory methods was contracted to make the seminar inclusive, so as to avoid what we imagined might be the risk of leaders of indigenous organisations feeling excluded from the discussion

.It was interesting to note the diverse reactions of the participants. The representatives of some of the political parties gradually left during the course of the seminar after demonstrating their concern for the issue of identity cards for the poor and excluded. In the past, this had been a tendentious issue as some political parties had given voters in rural areas forged identity cards and perhaps the politicians did not wish by their presence to remind people of this. On the other hand, some of the NGOs present, especially the women's groups, protested because now the donors were putting this issue on the table, when before they had been the ones to try to develop it and their efforts had not been acknowledged.

The Bolivian consultants and national staff of some international agencies, with whom León was friends protested to her about the methodology of the workshop, objecting to the use of their time, and the lack of seriousness with which the subject was being considered without, for example, any discussion on the concept of democracy. Others, with more sense of humor responded to playing with cards with sarcasm saying, “We look like a bunch of ‘campesinos’ (rural peasants) in a participatory planning process”.

Eighteen of the civil society organisations represented at the seminar decided to form a consortium that was then to take on a life of its own. León was asked to act as facilitator to the forum, still funded by DFID. Aware of the time pressure, the organisations agreed to meet again one month later and to use that meeting for developing a programme of work that the donors could fund. At that next meeting they made a decision not to design a ‘challenge fund’ model where organisations would have to compete for funds (which had been Eyben’s original idea) but to design an overall programme with each member of the consortium responsible for implementation in its own part of the country. Thus they developed a mode of working based on principles of collaboration and mutual support rather than on the donor-favoured model of competition.

On behalf of DFID and the two other interested donors Eyben stayed in touch with the evolution of debate within the consortium. It was a new association of many organisations who had not previously worked with each other. We came to an agreement whereby a management committee chosen by the 18 members of the consortium would be responsible for the direction, an international non governmental organisation (INGO) would be selected by the donors, in consultation with the consortium, with the responsibility of managing the funds.

There was also the advantage that by channelling the donors’ money through the NGOs’ office back in the capital city in the North we could be maintaining the fiction that this was NGO to NGO support and nothing to do with official aid. Tactically it allowed VIPFE and DFID to maintain their different stance on this issue without the need for a further confrontation. At the same time, DFID, along with Elyria and with VIPFE’s blessing agreed to provide some money to the Electoral Court through the medium of the United Nations. By giving money to the state DFID hoped that such support would serve as some kind of protection for the civil society consortium.

We needed to identify an INGO that had local offices around the country so that financial monitoring could take place more easily. There was an Elyrian INGO that would suit perfectly and the head of the country office was enthusiastic. We agreed that Rosario would work with these Elyrians to support the consortium in drawing up a project document that could be presented for funding to the donors. Then, in early November and out of the blue, the head of the NGO country office wrote Eyben an apologetic and brief note to say that his head office back in Elyria’s capital had instructed him not to proceed. He was not sure why but something was happening behind the scenes. He was personally very disappointed. We were disturbed but not unduly so and did not bother to enquire further as to why this had happened. We drew up a list of other potential managers and the bilateral donors involved sent a letter asking if they were interested. All but two declined, commenting on the

financial and political risks involved. The remaining two, proposed themselves as a consortium and we accepted them.

Now we had three consortia: 18 civil society organisations, two NGOs and three bilateral donors. *By far the most fragile of these was the donor group.*

## **Crisis**

### **The donor consortium breaks up**

By December, the parameters of the project had been finalised. It was proposed to: a) reduce the number of people excluded from exercising their rights as citizens because they do not have the documents needed to be able to register and vote or because for various reasons they abstain from participating in elections; b) inform and educate the population about the exercise of their rights as citizens, in order to develop society's control over politicians and the State; and c) upgrade the political debate amongst excluded and non-voting groups, linking these groups' demands to what is on offer in the election, and thereby increase these groups' influence on local political agendas.

Although the design of the project had taken longer than originally envisaged, it looked as if it would start on schedule in early January, allowing six months for implementation before the elections at the end of June. During these final stages of negotiation a fourth bilateral donor, Frumland had become interested and joined the group of donors increasing the size of the financial basket available for the project.

It looked as if the four donors were ready to approve their financing but in the New Year Elyria and Frumland began to impose a number of new conditions on the consortium. These conditions concerned ensuring the approval of the government. They included formal letters of support from the various vice-ministries of gender, indigenous people and popular participation, as well as from the police, the national electoral court and the Ombudswoman. Another condition required that the members of the consortium demonstrate they were not representing particular political parties and that the consortium would agree to the NGO manager immediately stopping the funding of any consortium member that could be seen to be involved in party politics.. Aware that time was of essence with the elections now less than six months away the leaders of the civil society consortium pulled all their personal and political strings to meet these conditions, aided by Rosario who established a strong and very collaborative working relationship with the colonel of police responsible for voter registration. He was not corrupt and he really cared about human rights, subsequently appearing on the platform of consortium meetings in his formal dress uniform amidst bearded radicals and indigenous leaders in traditional costume.

By now it was early February. Elyria and Frumland were surprised and it seemed to us disconcerted that all the conditions had been met and that the imposition of these conditions had actually resulted in a project with broader based support. At this very moment Matthew, the project's Elyrian champion was rushed into hospital for an emergency operation. In his absence, Jack, the Elyrian head of office decided that he could not approve the project. The reasons given were on technical grounds that Matthew's colleague, a Bolivian and the other governance specialist, had advised that the project activities would not deliver value for money – that generalised voter

education through mass media would be more effective than through on the ground activities in marginal and remote areas of the country..

We, the consortium and the NGOs received the news with amazement, grief and anger. Members of the civil society consortium pointed suspicious fingers at the Elyrian governance specialist whom they said was known to be associated with a political party that had had a long standing quarrel with another party with which some members of the consortium had previously been associated. Rumours and allegations flew around La Paz. Frumland also had a Bolivian governance specialist who, acting on the advice of his Elyrian colleague recommended to the head of the Frumland office that they also withdraw. The consortium was thunderstruck. Was this the end of the project, dying before it was born?

### **The civil society consortium is strengthened**

The civil society consortium held an emergency meeting with DFID and Redmark. Emotional speeches were made about the effort they had made to design the project to respond to all the donor concerns. They spoke of their despair and incomprehension that now it was to be abandoned at this late stage. Would DFID and Redmark go ahead without the others? The two remaining donors were not sure. They said that in any case the budget would have to be seriously cut. The consortium expressed willingness to redesign the project, provided funding could be guaranteed. DFID declared that it could not take the political risk of being seen to fund this project when all other donors had withdrawn. However, it would go ahead provided Redmark stayed in.

After three days of deliberation, the head of Redmark agreed stay in. Within a week the project document had been signed and the consortium had started work, with one month lost due to the delaying tactics of Elyria and Frumland. The emotional strain and the need to work together at a time of crisis produced interesting and unexpected consequences. The consortium members said that they had been strengthened through adversity and appreciated that perhaps the financially reduced project may well have made it something more feasible to achieve. . Most significantly they felt that they now truly 'owned' the project. They also looked at DFID and Redmark in a different light, treating the staff in a more friendly and informal fashion. They noted, as did we, that they seemed to be better at managing and keeping together their consortium than had the donors with their own group. Our fallibility and internal disputes and backstabbing had made us more human and less like alien bureaucrats. There was more trust among everyone who stayed the course. This resulted also in a much stronger tie between DFID and Redmark staff who had previously not worked closely together.

Matthew came out of hospital to discover what had happened and wrote me a deeply apologetic personal note. The rest of the donor community looked on with interest as Eyben and the head of the Elyrian office, formerly great allies during the PRSP process, avoided each other at official receptions. 'Would she ever talk to him again?' people asked. It was noted Eyben no longer went on the picnics with Jack and Joanna from VIPFE. Some months were to pass before normal relations were re-established.

## **The project and the right to identity**

The project had five months to run before the elections. It was interesting to note that some members of the civil society consortium put their most junior staff to work on it. As if they did not want to invest their most significant personnel in something that could be too ephemeral, that could not have any continuity.

For their part, the populations with whom the work was initiated responded immediately with the formation of groups of local facilitators to work in the most agile manner in finding those without identity cards. This strategy was important in order to reach people, with different dimensions of poverty. If the consortium had done it the other way around, directly searching for the excluded rather than working through the local communities, we would not have been able so easily to determine the situation.

For the first time it was brought to the attention of state institutions the very high numbers of people who could not vote because they lacked identity cards. Some had no papers at all (either never having had or having lost their birth or baptism certificates). Many others had papers that were regarded as invalid because of clerical errors made in the past by the registry service, the police or the election commission. Rectifying these errors implied trips back to their place of origin and lengthy and costly judicial processes.

On a visit with León to one of the areas where the project was active and listening all morning to these stories Eyben arrived at the conclusion that the State was making citizens pay with blood, tears and scarce money for the errors committed by the State itself. Personal horror stories were recounted with passion and grief. One man spoke of how he had no right even to his name because he had no official identity. In a separate paper León has analysed the exclusionary effects of the lack of identity cards (León et al. 2003: 4). The findings revealed the fallacy of a country-owned poverty reduction strategy that donors were funding. Those for whom the strategy was allegedly designed not only had no voice in the formal political process; they were also denied economic and educational opportunity because the state had denied them identity.

The attitude of the state agencies responsible for the elections towards the Consortium and their propositions was very positive. They thought it important to be able to get, through the Consortium, at places they were never able to get at before. In the beginning, there was mistrust between the state institutions, particularly between national ones over the institutional capabilities of one or the other agency and the difficulties that these would have in making collective conventions between all of them or with civil society.

It was a lot easier to coordinate all the mentioned agencies at the local level during the implementation process. Inter-institutional committees were even formed in two departmental capitals. Many NGOs were surprised to discover the good will shown by the police. Inter-institutional work brigades were established to go out into the rural areas not only to provide identification cards, but also to determine what significance

these had on the formation of citizens and the institutional consumption and participation of the excluded. Further technical teams of the departmental electoral courts were formed to provide training on the democratic process.

A national network of local radios was established to transmit information, but also to give voice to the excluded in their native languages. General standards of minimum learning content were achieved, but these were adapted and structured themselves to the particularities of each place. Court proceedings were initiated to resolve the infinite number of issues relating to personal identification. Agreements for legal assistance were made with universities. Meetings with authorities were initiated in order to overcome the less complex and deep-rooted problems. The people would say “it makes a difference to come as a national Consortium; now they give us importance. Otherwise, who would give us any importance if we were to come on our own account?”

Special encounters with party politicians were prepared so that they would reach excluded people, not only through radio but also in person. One indigenous person said to León, “I have never seen a politician. This is the first time that I see one” The reaction of people when hearing about their rights was interesting: “Are those rights truly for us?” “We can use those rights?” “Things would be different if that was true?”

The activities at the local level were rounded off with a national Fair in Santa Cruz, attended by agencies and the public in general and was transmitted through all the radios that had entered into the network. It was undeniable that the mobilization of the country’s interest around the issue was achieved. Following the political crisis and the establishment of a new government in October 2003 we noted that the first priority of the new Ministry for Social Integration was stated to be the right to an identity.

It is important to emphasize that all this innovation would not have been possible without the constant, attentive, interested and committed participation of all the stakeholders, counting among them the staff from DFID and Redmark who sat at the table, understanding their role as actors alongside, rather than dictating to state agencies, social organizations and NGOs and the relations of trust that were established at all levels.

The civil society consortium did not follow the lines established for the maintenance of the clientelist system of established relationships between some donors and the NGOs. Instead, the idea was sown of the possibility of tackling exclusion from the people’s perspective. In so doing donors could find themselves accused of financing subversion and conflict. Without understanding sufficiently the perspectives and political visions of the grass roots members of the consortium, the two remaining donors decided to go ahead, aware, but perhaps not fully aware of the risks they were taking. Once the decision had been taken to fund civil society despite the objections of the government, perhaps the most significant act was preparedness to change the design of the original project so that the consortium established itself and implemented the project on the principle of collective action rather than competition for funding. Thus in this instance donors were prepared to let civil society not only receive funds but also to design the way they would spend the money. If the political

responses to the management of aid are born from a reading of reality where the state is intended to continue transforming society, without giving society the choice of transforming itself and the state, we suggest that systems of exclusion tend to endure.

## **THE AMBIGUITIES OF OWNERSHIP**

### **Aid as a gift**

The general perception in Bolivia, of foreigners and Bolivians alike, is that it is a society based on the personal relationship of the gift rather than of impersonal relations of entitlement. Thus aid from foreign donors, that started its life as tax on citizens of the North, becomes part of this complex local set of gift relationships and struggles for power and patronage. Is the gift the rightful possession of the elected recipient government, or of the poor people whose voice is largely ignored by that same government? To what extent does the donor maintain discretion as to whom the gift shall be given? On what criteria and by whose judgement? By deciding to ignore the wishes of the representatives of the elected government was not DFID reaffirming its patronage role, giving and taking away aid as it saw fit rather than as the host country government saw fit?

In a global market economy one set of global monetary transactions stands out by its difference. This is the giving of money from OECD countries, from governments and citizens, to the rest of the world. For many years 'aid', 'donor' and 'recipient' were the terms commonly used to describe these transactions but these are being replaced by what are considered more acceptable descriptions, so that aid becomes 'development co-operation' and donors and recipients are 'partners'. There is no single explanation for this change in language but, rather, it is symptomatic of the essential discomfort that those involved feel about the anomaly of a gift relationship.

Aid as a gift has few friends in the world of development practice. They would prefer to see it defined as something else. While the liberal economist prefers to see it as an investment with long term returns the rights-based practitioner would like it to become an entitlement. Both points of view subscribe to the idea of 'ownership'. For the World Bank it is an efficiency argument. Governments that own their policies (and the money that supports the implementation of such policies) are more likely to deliver the results that donors want. In other words governments must own what is given to them. The other point of view equally prefers 'ownership' because it implies an inalienable entitlement. This second point of view strongly dislikes the 'shadow' side of the gift relationship. It is particularly upsetting for those working in non-governmental organisations that are seeking to promote social justice and equality: 'As in a relationship between landlord and tenant, at the centre of the donor-recipient relationship is an exchange of deference and compliance by the client in return for the patron's provision' (Crewe & Harrison, 1998)

One of the problems with a gift is its slipperiness. Contracts are much more straightforward. There is no consensus as to what is a gift. While it is quite useful to think of it as something different from 'impersonal' market transactions on the one hand and entitlements on the other hand (Zelizer 1998), we should be alert to



identifying elements of two or even all three types of resource transfer in any particular set of relationships. Market transactions and entitlements both contain the idea of impersonality and impartiality. The gift introduces the personal and the partial into these. For this reasons gift relationships are usually described in the terms of the personal, rather than the institutional.<sup>6</sup> However to make such a binary distinction may obscure as much as clarify.

A taxpayer may feel that that part of her contribution going to an official aid programme *is* a gift in that it expresses for her the sentiment of personal and societal solidarity with people in another part of the world. Likewise, the staff in the donor agency responsible for transferring the taxpayer's contribution to the aid recipient, may act both impartially (as rational, impersonal bureaucrats following procedures) and exercise partial patronage in pursuit of moral or organisational objectives.<sup>7</sup> Thus I recruited Rosario to work on the elections project without any formal competition and León, as the agency consultant, in turn identified those civil society leaders whom she thought would be most capable of making the process work. Both instances can be seen as examples of patronage because we did not subject our decisions to normal bureaucratic requirements of competition. The wheels of donor recipient relations are constantly oiled by the practice of the gift.

Gifts are ambiguous with irreducible elements of power and morality that shape their character. (Mirowski 2001). A gift always has an intention behind it – and is therefore interested. On the other hand, if the intention is moral or sacred, then it is also disinterested. Givers sees themselves as a vehicle or intermediary in the delivery of a gift from God. Thus, givers should not be thanked because they have no interest in the gift. When gifts are seen as sacred it is bad manners to express gratitude to the human intermediary (Appadurai, 1985). Along the same lines, a representative of a donor agency dislikes being thanked personally when authorising aid expenditure. It implies there is a personal interest whereas the representative wishes it to be understood that he or she is, like a religious devotee, simply acting on behalf of the taxpayer. The donor patronage is personal and sacred. No wonder passions run high!

Gifts have a further ambiguity. As an expression of the sacred or the moral, they are a recognition of a social bond between giver and the receiver, But that same recognition can be imbued with sentiments of power and even aggression. The receiver may find himself in a position of accepting a gift which he cannot refuse<sup>8</sup> (Callari, 2002, Amariglio, 2002). This paradox is very clear in the aid relationship. No recipient government or NGO wants to be aid-dependent – and they may attribute that dependency to the unjust way in which the powerful manage the world's economy.

The strong sentiments of VIPFE staff concerning donor-driven projects is a reflection of their wish to gain control over their country's sovereignty, not to be pushed around

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<sup>6</sup> Godelier ,for example, proposes that the act of giving must be voluntary and personal. 'If not it immediately becomes something else, a tax, for example, or extortion.' (1999:14).

<sup>7</sup>In examining the role of patronage in bureaucracies Herzfeld (1992) assumes that patronage inside a bureaucracy is always linked to the pursuit of personal advantage but aid agencies exemplify that it can be codified and regulated as an approved organisational activity.

<sup>8</sup> Thus the Government of India has recently decided to reduce the number of countries with whom it has an aid relationship. On the one hand it is asserting its autonomy by telling some countries that it no longer wants its gifts but, on the other hand, has informed more powerful countries that it will continue to let them run aid programmes in India.

by donors to whom they have to be polite. A striking characteristic of one of the most influential of the VIPFE staff was the rudeness with which donor staff were treated. It was perhaps an expression of the anger felt about the dependency of the relationship. Although donors use the language of 'partnership' a gift in practice reinforces or even reinvents the difference between donor and recipient (Stirrat & Henkel, 1997). Entitlements, on the other hand, concern impersonal contracts to which both parties subscribe. A PRSP is an attempt to establish such a contract that provides the guaranteed flow of resources to the recipient. Except that, other than the debt relief, it does not so provide despite VIPFE's every effort to interpret donor money as a binding contract, not as a capricious gift.

## **Ownership**

The concept of national ownership is thus a step towards the entitlement idea but because the contract is not binding, aid remains a gift. As such its paradoxical and elusive nature challenges the distinction between primary ownership and possession. Osteen (2002:233 quoting Weiner) notes that it is possible to 'keep while giving'. Whereas an entitlement is inalienable – once passed over to the other person the original owner no longer has any claims on it – a gift may never leave its owner although, through giving, it passes into the possession of the recipient.

This particular quality of the gift illuminates current anxieties in the aid world concerning 'ownership' and 'partnership'. Jerve defines the former as 'who decides what in the process of aid delivery'. Ownership is seen to come with responsibility. He notes that NORAD, the Norwegian aid agency, has a term 'recipient responsibility' that is the same thing as recipient government ownership (Jerve, 2002:394). In a study for Sida, the Swedish aid agency, an institutionalist analysis of the aid relationship posits four conditions that must be met for the aid to be owned by the recipient or what the study described as the 'beneficiary owner' (Ostrom et al, 2002:12)

- Recipients need to annunciate a demand for aid
- Recipients need to reciprocate the aid by putting some of their own resources into the project
- Recipients must find the aid useful
- Recipients must have clear cut responsibilities and be able to participate in decisions regarding continuance or non continuance of a project

How does the election project match up against these criteria? No one asked for the aid – it was a donor idea. Nor did the consortium did not put any of their own resources into the project. However, they did find it useful and they had clear-cut responsibilities in the project's implementation. As to decisions regarding continuance of the project, that is another story that has not yet reached a conclusion and that we will not tell here. If the Bolivian government is understood as the arbiter for the aid given to the country, then the ownership was even less. Our only defence is that the project appears to have had a bigger impact on Bolivia, namely an awareness and knowledge of a great social injustice (the millions of people denied their citizenship rights) than any other element of British aid. It was for this reason the in the special newspaper supplement for the Queen's Birthday in Bolivia this year, this was the UK Government activity that was pride of place.

These recent reflections on ownership indicate some of the dilemmas in which donors find themselves when seeking to promote recipient country ownership. If the donor maintains most of the decision making powers he remains the owner even although the recipient is in possession of the money. In the case of the elections project, the situation was made worse by DFID refusing to allow VIPFE even to have possession of some of its money and worst of all to make this refusal public.

VIPFE's formal objection to the project had been couched in technical aid terms concerning DFID breaking of the CDF agreement. Informally, accusations were made that DFID was interfering naively in political processes about which they knew nothing. The issue of citizens deprived of their right to vote was regarded as trivial. It allegedly affected very few people and it was communicated to me informally, through an intermediary, that if people did not have identity cards it was because they were opting out of their responsibilities as citizens. In other words it was alleged that they were excluding themselves, not being excluded.

The disagreement between DFID and Elyria exemplified the dilemma in which donors found themselves in Bolivia. It was not that the head of the Elyria office was not capable of undertaking political analysis and his assessment of what was happening in Bolivia was similar to mine.. He acknowledged the dubious legitimacy of the regime as one that political scientists would term 'a minimally institutionalised state'(Moore & Putzel 1999) The disagreement was not about analysis but appropriate action. I argued that the Poverty Reduction Strategy was unviable if many of the people for whom the strategy was intended were excluded from the democratic political process. Thus, if donors should be simultaneously supporting the elected government they should also be supporting the organisations that were seeking to give poor people a stronger voice in the elections.

That viewpoint however led to the accusation of over-interference in another country's affairs and of undermining the new aid agenda of the government being the driving seat. Both DFID and Elyria were global leaders in the new agenda. Their ministers met regularly and had been major players in having the PRSP established as the new donor instrument. In Bolivia, the heads of the local offices represented well their ministers' agenda and had taken a common position on the importance of the PRSP and the CDF. The elections project forced them to make choices. By deciding to initiate and then publicly support the consortium, DFID had broken the very rules of the game to which it had subscribed. It was a clear case of DFID claiming it knew better than the Bolivian government as to how to spend its money. It was 'donor-driven'. Through my action DFID insisted on sitting in the driving seat and in an arena of intense complexity. Jack in the Elyrian office decided that national ownership should be given priority over specific and, on their own terms, worthy efforts to strengthen democracy. Jack saw this fundamental change in the relations between donor and recipient as being more important. As long as donors spent their money as they saw fit, privileging their analysis over that of the government's, then the old patron-client style of relationship between recipient and donor would continue. National ownership was the first step to recipient governments being *entitled* to aid money, rather than being dependent on donors' whims.

Elyria's position was however undermined in two ways. Firstly because Jack may have been over-influenced by the party political interest of one of his own Bolivian

staff members and secondly, by the presence of his government-funded NGO operating in the country according to its own donor-driven programme. If DFID had had such an arrangement the election project could have been initiated and implemented through that channel and DFID itself could have had a clean pair of hands. The abrupt withdrawal of that NGO from managing the elections project may have been because Jack realised that the contradictions in Elyria's position would become too transparent if their NGO was being blatantly used to implement a project that was *politically* unacceptable to the government. .

## **Conclusion**

In exploring who owns the gift we have encountered a challenge of mutual comprehension arising from not only speaking different languages but from being positioned so differently in the chain of giving and receiving. Although we agree concerning the story of the elections project we have found that our conceptual framework is different. Our struggles to communicate with each other at a deeper theoretical level are itself an apt illustration of the problems inherent in international aid. Donors tend to avoid such struggles by defining the parameters of knowledge. Between the construction of reality guaranteed by consultancy firms contracted by the state and international development agencies and the language of collective action of the civil society consortium exists a range of situations called 'reality', whose objectivity does not depend on its epistemic status but rather on political will and capacity.

We have discovered that whereas Eyben, from the position of donor, finds useful the concept of the gift as one that throwing a new light on the nature of the donor-recipient relationship, León prefers to conceive of aid as a public good. She proposes that, so far as it is a common resource and good, the production connotations of development aid causes it not to have owners but administrators, This administration, based on the regulation of a scarce resource, implies negotiation, communication, participation, solidarity, and acknowledgment; nevertheless it also implies manipulation, opportunism and domination. .Therefore, being a common good is an attribute intrinsic to its constitution. For its effective realization and not alienation, it can only be based on consensual and participatory relations, and the equilibrium between what is formal institutionally and the creativity and innovative capacity of collective action.

We decided therefore that the previous section in this paper on the ambiguity of ownership should remain Eyben's analysis and León would further develop her ideas separately and in another paper. Beyond a discussion over the interpretative models, it is important to recognize that so called reality as a construction will always be subject to different subjective dimensions; in other words, to the communicational and relational processes between diverse actors and their interests, capabilities, possibilities, dreams and emotions. This is what we have both learnt in experiencing and reflecting upon the elections project.

We started this paper by referring to the emotions and passions roused during the design of an aid project. Those involved lived the experience of aid being offered and then being withdrawn. The ownership remained with the donor. While giving the owner was also keeping. That process of giving both expressed and transformed patterns of personal and organisational relationships. The gift itself had a bright and a shadow side, expressed in terms of solidarity, trust and affection on the one hand, and betrayal, anger and aggression on the other hand. Yet, if we were to read the official donor agency records concerning this project, we would find a logical framework, indicators of achievement and 'neutral' evaluations. A peculiar sanitisation would have occurred that presents a plausible fiction of a rational bureaucracy making informed value for money judgements as to the most effective and efficient means of achieving poverty reducing outcomes.

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