March 2013

Politics & Governance

Facilitating develoment

an arm's length approach to aid

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Introduction

The evidence is now overwhelming that most of the binding constraints in development are about institutions and institutional change. At the various interlocking levels of the development process in poor countries, the prevailing institutions – the formal and informal rules underpinning behaviour – undermine optimal use of the available financial and human resources. Institutions that might enable people to act decisively in their collective long-term interests are either missing or distorted.

Often this is about power. The way institutions work in practice is shaped by the underlying distribution of economic, social and political power – by the nature of the underlying 'elite bargain' or political settlement. However, these arrangements are not fixed indefinitely. Both power structures and institutions can change, as people at different levels of society find ways of overcoming normally prohibitive collective action problems. This is why change processes matter. Progressive institutional change is the core of what development is about.

Official development agencies know this. They are aware that the impacts they have on the institutions of a country are more important than all other dimensions of their engagement. Typically, however, they have considerable difficulty acting in light of that knowledge. This is partly because of the continued enthusiasm for a financing-gap concept of aid, focusing attention on the scale of resource transfers to poor countries. Efforts are measured in terms of funds raised and disbursed, not institutional changes facilitated. But there is another reason too. The work of helping poor countries and their citizens to overcome institutional blockages to development is genuinely hard and poorly understood. It is particularly challenging for organisations originally set up – as official aid agencies were – for the limited purpose of addressing countries' trade, technology and financing gaps.

In light of these constraints, it is a good thing – many are concluding – that some official agencies and private foundations have been moving towards supporting organisations that do in-country work not as funders of development but as facilitators of change. One of the most promising features on the current landscape of international development is the constructive role being played by a new breed of actors. These new actors are not donors, not even 'new donors'. They attract funding from official donor or charitable sources, but in many cases retain a significant degree of self-regulation. They offer services directly to governments and other public bodies in developing countries, but more as advisors than as providers. This is aid, but delivered, as it were, at arm's length, with the primary purpose of facilitating difficult institutional change. We might call these actors semi-autonomous enablers of development progress.

This think piece sets out a case for greater use of 'arm's length' forms of aid building on some of the implications of recent research. It begins with a slightly fuller statement of why it is necessary to see institutional change as central to development. This establishes that facilitating change processes, and in particular brokering solutions to problems of collective action, is a key task, and that external organisations may have some role to play in this. The think piece then reports the results of an initial encounter with a small set of organisations that prima facie fit the description of semi-autonomous enablers of development progress. It collects and collates the views in that group about the organisational forms and ways of working that have enabled the organisations to begin to engage constructively in processes of institutional change. It concludes with an invitation to a wider debate on the issues raised.

Institutional change and its facilitation

It is well established that power and institutions are the keys to the political economy of policy choice and policy implementation in developing countries. Power structures shape the way institutions work, which has historically been the main driver of development results (Khan, 1995; 2010; North et al., 2009; 2013). Contrary to the simpler type of institutional theory recently revived by Acemoglu and Robinson (2012), it is not enough for nations to adopt the 'right' institutions as judged by current practices in the countries that are now the richest in the world. What are needed are institutions that enable better results to be achieved in the context of a political settlement or fundamental elite bargain actually prevailing in a country, which may be either mildly or strongly inimical to national economic and social development.

This is likely to mean institutions that are 'second best' in terms of some abstract ideal (Rodrik, 2008), 'good enough' in terms of current global standards of governance quality (Grindle, 2007) or oriented to a 'good fit' with local circumstances, rather than to a de-contextualised notion of 'best practice' (Levy and Fukuyama, 2010). It certainly means that world regions that are still very poor, such as sub-Saharan Africa, should look for models in areas that were similarly poor relatively recently, such as Southeast Asia, before mimicking practices in the global North (Pritchett et al., 2010; van Donge et al., 2012).

These propositions provide common reference points for much current research on governance for development. However, from the point of view of development action, the perspective they offer is rather non-specific and potentially discouraging. Who is to decide what is 'good enough', what constitutes 'good fit' and how? Does every initiative of development intervention have to begin with its own analysis of the country and sector context, starting from scratch? Can researchers not offer more specific guidance to practitioners, a question Grindle (2011) posed sharply a couple of years ago?

The view informing this think piece is that they can. Recent research has clarified two points in particular about the likely content of progressive institutional change in poor developing countries. This in turn says something definite about the forms of international action that are most likely to have something important to contribute, raising the issue of arm's length aid.

First, comparative research on development trajectories in sub-Saharan Africa and Southeast Asia has underlined that it is not inevitable that political settlements take on an anti-developmental complexion, even in very poor countries with highly imperfect institutions. National elites may be utterly incapable of undertaking the coordinated actions that are required to kick-start the raising of agricultural productivity. They may be quite unable to provide credible commitments to potential investors. As a result, economic transformation – as distinct from faster aggregate growth – may be postponed indefinitely. But this is not inevitable. Several Southeast Asian countries that were poorer than their African equivalents in 1960 have done it (Henley and van Donge, 2012; van Donge et al., 2012; Vlasblom, 2013). Not only that, but there are clear signs that African countries can do it too, so long as there are conditions that stimulate national elites to overcome the collective action problems that ordinarily keep them focused on narrow self-interest and the short term (Booth, 2012b; Kelsall, 2013).

Second, the idea of 'good fit' institutionality can be given more specific content. Until recently, it was defined only in opposition to the 'best practice' and 'good governance' themes that have tended to dominate policy thinking since the end of the Cold War. However, the latest research makes clear that the most actionable characteristic of the institutional framework in poor developing countries is the prevalence of unresolved collective action problems. Prevailing institutions do most harm by inhibiting action in pursuit of collective benefits and public goods. The institutional innovations most critically needed are those that would enable more successful and widespread collective action (Booth, 2012c). Relatedly, the most promising approaches to organisational and institutional improvement are based on iterative, adaptive approaches, starting in problem-solving mode (Andrews et al., 2012).

While the single most important collective action problems are those at the elite level underlying the political settlement itself, such problems are found at all levels and within all sectors (Corduneanu-Huci et al., 2013; Ostrom, 2005; Shivakumar, 2005). The opportunities for progress through the mechanism of overcoming barriers to collective action are non-negligible at the level of particular productive sectors (Whitfield and Therkildsen, 2011). At various levels, they affect the provision of public goods and services (Mcloughlin, 2012; Wild et al., 2012).

In the recent past, the centrality of collective action problems and the scope for constructive action to address them has been underestimated in the development business. Reasons include the influence, especially since the 2004 World Development Report (World Bank, 2003), of the view that the 'demand' for better public services and greater accountability for service provision is first and foremost a principal-agent problem, a problem of information asymmetry. This diagnosis privileges remedies that centre on improving information supply to service users, including information on their rights or entitlements. Major efforts have been invested on this basis, with rather mixed results (Booth, 2012a; Mansuri and Rao, 2012). A side-effect has been neglect of theories of change that centre on the solution of collective action problems.

The survey of institutional constraints to service delivery cited above (Wild et al., 2012) does not exclude the possibility that community monitoring and other 'demand-side' interventions have a role in improving state responsiveness and quality of public goods. However, it confirms that collective action challenges are important on both the 'demand' and the 'supply' sides of the service interface, meaning the remedy may require more than just a simple joining-up of demand and supply initiatives. It also agrees with research suggesting that solutions need to be locally anchored, meaning that i) they address the constraints and opportunities arising in specific national or subnational contexts and ii) they are open to building on locally established ways of doing things (Booth, 2012c; Booth and Cammack, forthcoming; Cleaver, 2012; Crook and Booth, 2011).

Ongoing work in the Politics and Governance Programme at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) suggests further that there is already a good deal of experience of external organisations, mostly international or local non-governmental organisations (NGOs), working with some success as brokers of collective action or facilitators of change on either or both sides of a service relationship. Commonly, this is being done in the framework of an intervention that is formally about the downward accountability of providers to users or rights-based stimulation of client demand. That is, there is a mismatch between the formal theory of change governing the intervention and the real one. Examples have been documented for Malawi (Wild and Harris, 2012), Sierra Leone and Tanzania (Booth, 2012d). Conversations under way with a variety of international NGOs on the theme Don't build stuff, get people talking! are in the process of generating further insights into under-recognised current practices and future possibilities. Whether more official aid might usefully be delivered 'at arm's length' with a focus on change facilitation is not the same issue as the one being discussed with the NGOs, but it is closely related. In the meantime, the broader question on whether social sector development assistance programmes might be designed better so they engage more directly with institutional constraints affecting service delivery has been further explored in case studies by Tavakoli et al. (2012; 2013). This work makes clear, among other things, that success in this field entails being highly opportunistic and responsive in relation to country political contexts, getting well embedded in the country realities generally and, in agreement with Andrews at al. (2012), having a flexible and highly adaptive or learning-oriented management style.

The need for new aid models

The body of work summarised in the last section indicates that institutional blockages are indeed central to development. It suggests further that at least some of these blockages are amenable to external influence, most promisingly in the form of facilitation of collective action solutions or brokering of processes of change. As the Introduction to this think piece began to suggest, these findings pose a rather substantial challenge to official development assistance agencies, including bilateral donors such as the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and multilateral concessional lenders such as the World Bank. These agencies have been committed for at least a decade to the principle that programme designs need to start from country realities. In this spirit, DFID and other major agencies now routinely provide their advisory staff with training in 'applied political economy analysis', with organisations like ODI and The Policy Practice (TPP) providing inputs (ODI/TPP, recurrent). However, this has significant limitations. Having been alerted to the need for a deeper understanding of country realities and equipped with some tools for doing so, donor advisory staff report that they face real difficulties in changing the way they work.

As argued earlier, some of the barriers arise from the politics of aid, which leads to an overwhelming emphasis on financial transfers. In the current UK context, where aid spending has been rising sharply and is politically contested, the organisational context is particularly unfavourable. It generates incentives within country offices to disburse funds quickly, to emphasise tangible results delivered according to a pre-established timetable and to be averse to risks, especially reputational risks. This is inimical to taking up opportunities to work constructively on institutional change issues, since it is generally recognised that such work may entail little or no transfer of funds, will at best have results that may be substantial but are neither tangible nor predictable and may well involve several sorts of risk.

There are, however, other reasons why official donors and concessional lenders are poorly placed to exploit opportunities in the field of institutional change. First, having been set up to transfer resources and technical knowledge, they are fundamentally in the business of designing and implementing programmes that do that. Since financial transfers are subject to conditions set by ministers and overseen by Northern parliaments, agency staff have to be skilled in the corresponding monitoring and policy dialogue functions. Typically on two- or three-year postings, internationally recruited staff assume large responsibilities for reporting to head office and providing answers to parliamentary questions. Second, since the decline of project modalities of assistance, there are fewer and fewer reasons to get out of the office and into the 'field' in any sense. Serious interaction with country stakeholders tends to take the form of monitoring missions and policy dialogue opportunities, often in a multi-donor context, with an emphasis on fiduciary compliance. In organisations like DFID, the trend has been away from spending time with country partners outside of such settings.

As we have seen, research does not rule out the desirability of external development assistance. It does, however, raise some very large questions about the way it is currently conceived of and practised.

First, there are questions about the likely effectiveness of external support to institutional change if this is linked to the disbursement of substantial funding. In particular, based on evidence from Pakistan, provision of funds to self-help organisations would seem to stand a high chance of making collective action more, not less, difficult (Bano, 2012). The accountability templates that are associated with external funding to local social movements in Africa also seem inclined to do institutional harm (Booth, 2012c). Second, effective facilitation of change calls for more local knowledge than donor staff can hope to acquire during a short posting, and much more continuous contact with local stakeholders than the typical office routines of donor agencies permit. Third, the facilitation of change is a fundamentally different activity than policy dialogue, implying tasks for which donor advisors have not usually been trained and in which they may have little or no experience. Thus, in the context of an already unfavourable politics of aid, official development agency employees experience multiple disabilities when it comes to contributing to institutional change in assisted countries.

Institutional change through arm's length aid?

It is in this context that the question of semi-autonomous change facilitation has arisen. The suggestion is that the field of development assistance is already to some extent populated by organisations that are better placed than donor and concessional lending agencies to act on some of the binding institutional constraints on development progress. These organisations are not official donors or charitable foundations, although they may and usually do receive the bulk of their funding from such sources. They may be established as private non-profit companies, self-governing implementing agencies, development projects or NGOs. Their function is not to deliver financial support to entities in poor countries, although they may do so to some extent. Nor is it to provide policy advice or technical assistance in the traditional sense of these terms. What they have in common is a relative freedom from the litany constraints that we have suggested get in the way of constructive engagement with country institutions from inside an official donor office.

ODI is familiar with several such organisations. Their activities include facilitating change or enabling other development stakeholders to confront and deal with complex institutional barriers to progress. Although we are still very far from having robust evidence on the subject, on the face of matters the organisations achieve some level of success in this activity. Their advantages appear to include a greater ability draw on and generate local knowledge; sufficient autonomy to be pragmatic and imaginative in responding to problems as posed on the ground; and being answerable at least to some extent to country partners rather than just to funders.
Independent evaluations of some of these 'semi-autonomous enabling organisations' are under way. In some cases, the evaluators are trying to distil the essence of the ways of working the organisations' pioneers have found to be effective. But until now there has been little explicit recognition of possible commonalities across organisations regarding, for example, their relationships with country stakeholders, what kinds of problems are tackled and in what way and exactly how any positive results are achieved. All are apparently responding to the same basic deficiencies in the direct donor approach to the institutional side of development, but they are doing so in different fields using a variety of organisa-

tional modalities. This may have obscured the common core of an approach that deserves greater recognition. This think piece is the result of an effort to shed more light on this question. It arises from an initial attempt to test the proposition that there are important commonalities and affinities across a small set of organisations that appear to meet the basic criteria.

On 27 November 2012, ODI's Politics and Governance Programme hosted an initial exchange of views of representatives of three organisations:

- The Tony Blair Africa Governance Initiative;
- The Budget Strengthening Initiative; and
- TradeMark East Africa.

Unlike the NGOs mentioned in the last section, these three organisations are distinguished by being oriented basically towards assisting governments and other public bodies (see Box 1). This gives them a particular sort of interest, since it is generally recognised that some of the greatest collective action challenges with implications for development are inside government.

The remainder of the think piece summarises the main results of this initial conversation and considers some of the implications. First, we elaborate on the description above of the features of the new approach – confirming that there are some positive commonalities that are recognised by all three organisations. We then review a number of features that were considered either not to be shared or not to be significant in their own right. This enables us to identify the core features of the approach and to begin to consider further how it should be characterised. The final section considers the implications for aid policy and possible next steps in getting these considered by a wider group.

Core features

An initial shortlist of distinguishing features was established based on some knowledge of the three organisations and some of the research-based insights discussed above. It included six items:

- Not being primarily concerned with disbursing funds;
- Being focused on finding solutions to problems, without a pre-established influencing agenda;
- Having an ability to recruit local or locally experienced staff on long-term contracts;
- With strong facilitation or networking capabilities;
- Subject to flexible forms of performance monitoring that reward learning and adjustment;
- Answerable to government or other local stakeholders, not just to funding bodies.

Box 1: The three semi-autonomous enabling organisations

Africa Governance Initiative

Launched in 2008, AGI is now supporting six different African leaders to bridge the gap between their vision for a better future and their government's ability to achieve it. Through Tony Blair at a senior level and through teams of dedicated country staff, it works to strengthen the government's capacity to deliver programmes that will change ordinary people's lives for the better, from public services and rural development to infrastructure and job creation.
http://www.africagovernance.org/africa/index/

Budget Strengthening Initiative

The Budget Strengthening Initiative is hosted by ODI, the UK's leading think-tank on international development and a leader in research into public finance management in developing countries and fragile states. It draws on expertise from across ODI and beyond to support fragile and conflict-affected states to build more effective, accountable and transparent budgets.
http://www.budgetstrengthening.org

TradeMark East Africa

TMEA is a platform for delivering multi-donor support to the East African Community's regional integration and trade improvement process, and the objectives set out in the EAC's Development Strategy. Established as a Kenyan incorporated company limited by guarantee, it provides a special purpose vehicle for support to regional institutions, national ministries, departments and agencies and non-state actors.
http://www.trademarkea.com/

Representatives of the three organisations provided comments on the relevance and significance of the suggested features on a pre-circulated questionnaire and then orally in a video conference. Following discussion, four items from the initial list survived scrutiny and two were relegated to a list of secondary or irrelevant features, along with some further initial propositions about preconditions or enabling factors. Some reordering of the core list in terms of relative importance or priority seemed to be recommended. We first discuss the core list under the four top priority headings before explaining the reasons for demoting or dismissing the others.

Not having a pre-established influencing agenda

This was thought to be fundamental. The three organisations work with stakeholders to help them address their problems in developing and implementing their policies. Partners are selected in the knowledge of what their formal policy commitments are, and the enabling organisation's ultimate goals naturally influence this decision. Once the selection has been made, however, there is no intention to change policies – the focus is on getting policies to work, or getting things done.

In the larger scheme of things, this open-endedness with respect to policy is, of course, the result of not having large funding obligations, as large disbursements inevitably entail some form of conditionality as well as selectivity. However, it was agreed that the delivery of modest amounts of funding as part of an assistance package – particularly if devoted to purchase of equipment or the like – should not be treated as alien to the approach. Indeed, an integrated and agile mixture of hardware inputs, 'soft' support and diligent follow-up has been seen by the partners of some of the organisations as particularly special and valuable.

Not having a pre-established influencing agenda seems to have value in part because it means being able to offer advice that is seen as independent. It may be offered on a confidential basis also, allowing for an unusual level of frankness, which may also be appreciated.

Staff of the organisations may be embedded within an office of the country's government or not; this is one of the ways the models differ. In the former case, the advice is obviously qualified by this embeddedness. It must be confidential, which is a limitation if the organisation has a research remit or wishes to contribute to wider national or international exchanges of view on a subject. It may also imply that the organisation is limited to expressing views on a relatively narrow band of reform issues and cannot articulate any vision for systemic change in the way the country is governed. It also tends to exclude any role in the coordination of the donors present in the government sector of the country, even where this is very weak and might benefit from some facilitation.

Finding solutions to problems and facilitating change

Not having an influencing agenda and offering independent advice do provide conditions in which staff of the organisations can play a facilitating role, not just an advisory one, enabling changes that address particular problems. The problems actually addressed seem to range quite widely, from organisational dysfunctions or poor working practices to problems of collective action proper, where the challenge is to construct institutions that control some form of free-riding. They may be about particular instruments, or about institutions in formation, such as medium-term expenditure frameworks, or more about linkages and coordination across government bodies or down the 'policy delivery chain'. Solutions will also range from organisational tricks of the trade ('convening stock-taking sessions', 'mobilising peer learning') – innovations that may and may not endure beyond an initial burst of enthusiasm – to catalysing institutional innovations that become, in the technical sense, self-reinforcing.

A key difference between the type of problem solving undertaken by semi-autonomous enabling organisations and the general approach of donors and lenders is in the attitude to partners. The organisations take governments as they find them and try to work with them, instead of hoping for something different or trying to make them behave in fundamentally different ways in the short or medium term. It is recognised that political incentives are not immediately malleable. It is necessary to work with them in order to make headway that may shift incentives further down the line.

Skills in facilitation do seem to be a part of the formula. The different organisations claim they bring a particular, unaccustomed type of facilitation skill to the business of development, although their nature differs – for example a 'private sector' type in one case; a combination of interpersonal skills and 'political savvy' acquired in UK government service in another.

Performance monitoring that rewards learning and adjustment

The organisations have their own strategic objectives – they are fully committed to the attainment of development results, and this figures in agreements with their funders. However, a shared feature that seems to be at the core of the approach is that the processes of change through which these objectives are to be met are not pre-programmed in any detail. There is a broad theory of change underpinning work but the 'story' does not have to be told in advance.

Thus, any logframe planning that has to be done is light on monitoring indicators that are defined ex ante. Or the framework is subject to regular revision in response to experience, with implementation monitoring being treated as a learning, not policing, activity, and staff being rewarded accordingly. In this respect, the three organisations aim to work in an adaptive way, practising some of the principles emphasised in recent policy literature (Andrews et al., 2012) as well as in influential reflections from the past century (Korten, 1980; Rondinelli, 1983).

The organisations differ in the degree to which they are subject to constraints imposed by their funders (e.g. DFID's Output Scoring) that are hard to reconcile with a resolutely adaptive approach. However, it seems clear that this represents the ideal towards which they all strive.

Being answerable to local stakeholders

The three organisations are of course all answerable to their funders. But a common feature is that the effects of this answerability are diluted somewhat by some measure of formal accountability to partner governments or other local stakeholders. This may take the form of full integration into an official chain of command, as in the case where the organisation's staff are embedded in a government office. It may alternatively be a matter of having representatives from the national private sector, inter-governmental bodies and/or government departments on an Advisory Board or similar.

Rather than providing a specious guarantee of 'country ownership', the latter type of arrangement has the particular benefit of creating some space between the organisation and its funders. This can enable the defence of the problem-solving and adaptive qualities of the work against any hyper-planning impulses or micro-management tendencies on the part of the funders. Having members of one of the big concessional lending agencies, acting in a technical capacity, on Advisory Boards may also serve this purpose.

Secondary features

It was thought initially that a feature of the core model might be an ability to recruit local or locally experienced staff on long-term contracts. This was suggested by the earlier argument that donors and concessional lenders typically fail to accumulate adequate local knowledge. However, even within our limited sample of three organisations, hiring and staff development policies were very varied. While flexible recruitment was generally favoured, there was no general bias towards local recruitment or indeed towards the hiring of highly experienced personnel. Effective facilitation work can be done, it seems, by very different sorts of people, and the particular knowledge and skills that count seem to be activity-specific and quite diverse.

Other design features of the participating organisations seemed similarly secondary or non-essential. All of the three had enjoyed an exceptional level of trust between the organisation's leaders and its principal funder at first, but this was not essential or a problem from the point of view of sustainability of benefits. There were advantages in being registered as a company in-country, but some disadvantages and some gains from being internationally mobile and in a position to choose country entry points and moments at which to withdraw. Sound management and organisation-building practices were of course essential, but this was not a differentiating factor from the point of view of alternative aid approaches.

Policy implications and next steps

Evidence on the importance of institutional change and collective action problems in development is accumulating fast. This being the case, there is an urgent need to look at a range of possible ways of using development assistance funds that reduce their harmful impacts on country institutions and explore fresh avenues for constructive engagement. In this context, it seems important that there exists a more or less new breed of development support organisations that have in common that they are geared to addressing challenges of these sorts.

It is too early to expect robust evaluation results that would allow us to judge how much of an impact this type of organisation is having. At the moment, we cannot even count on a body of well-documented stories about specific processes of change to which the three organisations in our initial sample have contributed in specifiable ways. As already mentioned, some evaluations are under way, and these may be expected to include some illustrative experiences. However, at this point the most important evaluation question may be 'What is the model?' What is the theory of change? Are there sufficient commonalities across the organisations that currently seem to qualify as semi-autonomous enablers of development progress to justify the label and the idea of a general approach that could be replicated and should promoted?

This think piece has taken a few tentative steps towards answering these questions. After summarising the general case for giving greater importance to institutions and change facilitation in development, it has brought together experiences and insights from an initial sample of three such organisations. This has suggested the core value of:

- Not having a pre-established influencing agenda;
- Finding solutions to problems and facilitating change;
- Performance monitoring that rewards learning and adjustment; and
- Being answerable to local stakeholders.

In 2013, we propose to elaborate and further test these ideas, beginning by subjecting them to critical inspection with a larger set of organisations and interested parties.

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This material has been funded by UK aid from the UK Government, however the views expressed do not necessarily reflect the UK Government's official policies.

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