

INFORMAL DEBATE ON PROMOTING IMPROVED AID QUALITY
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“The role of civil society, legislative bodies and other stakeholders in promoting improved aid quality, including monitoring and reporting on results”

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The theme of the informal debate raises the issue of the effectiveness and quality of official assistance to developing countries. As I am from Benin, my presentation will draw on the experience of sub-Saharan Africa.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the limitations of many national policies became evident, and assessments of official development assistance (ODA) proved to be negative. The aid spent to allay the suffering of citizens and boost development only yielded adverse results. Against this backdrop, it would be appropriate - and indeed necessary - to question the effectiveness of aid granted to poor countries by endeavouring to explore the role of parliaments from the perspective of their three constitutional roles.

1. As the representatives of the citizens of sovereign nations, parliamentarians should:
 - Make a meaningful contribution at the stage of formulating the general guidelines on aid;
 - Serve as a relay for information between citizens and other organs, including the Executive; and
 - Influence the major decisions regarding aid policy, and identify the concerns and pressing needs of citizens.

2. As the legislative body responsible for approving the State budget, which includes a portion of foreign aid, and the authority that approves aid and loan agreements, parliament should:
 - Participate in the design and formulation of development strategies;
 - Play a decisive role in the implementation of development programmes; and
 - Facilitate the formalization of the requisite legal framework for the speedy implementation of aid.

3. As the overseer of the Executive, parliament should:
 - Undertake, for purposes of public accountability, follow-up and evaluation of development policies and projects;
 - Monitor public expenses, including aid allocations approved by parliament;
 - Examine reporting on results and genuinely scrutinize management by adopting a threefold approach (concomitant verification upon execution, mid-way and post-management); and
 - Evaluate and gauge poverty-reduction measures with a view to proposing possible modifications and in keeping with the priorities and real needs of citizens.

As we see it, *in principle*, the legislative body is invested with important powers to enhance the quality of aid. However, the majority of the parliaments in developing countries do not use these powers. Why does the legislative body not fully play its role?

1. Parliamentarians themselves do not fully comprehend parliament's mandate.
2. Parliamentarians are confused about their role as actors within the parliamentary majority and as representatives of the people, which often leads them to place the interests of their group above the general interest.
3. The professional capacity of parliamentarians is limited in order to achieve favourable results; this is due in part to the way in which candidates are nominated, i.e. not based on criteria of competence but rather on subjective and political criteria.
4. The Executive has powers that extend to domains reserved for the legislative branch.
5. The Executive filters information transmitted to parliament and at the same time censors parliamentary debates via indirect means.
6. The attitude of donors and aid agencies tends to give greater importance to the Executive, thereby further mitigating parliament's oversight powers.

7. The laws contain several loopholes and lack genuine will with regard to combating corruption and mismanagement.

8. Sociological considerations encourage impunity and present obstacles to fighting mismanagement. Because in the political circles in Africa everyone knows each other, enforcing the law translates into "hurting your brother".

9. The legal instruments dealing with the organization of parliament often exclude minority opposition groups from the management of the parliamentary system. It would appear, therefore, that our countries have moved from political monolithism to relative parliamentary monolithism, which is not conducive to good governance.

10. The relations between parliament and civil society are tainted by the action of the Executive, which inevitably isolates parliament from civil society and also undermines parliament's power of representation.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. What can be said is that a number of prerequisites have to be met in order to enhance the effectiveness and quality of aid within the coming years.

These prerequisites are:

1. Support for the institutional capacity building of parliaments. For donors this implies direct allocation to parliament of a portion of the aid earmarked for improving working conditions (parliamentary infrastructure, professional libraries, computer hardware and specialized research capabilities) and for bringing parliaments closer to citizens with a view to fostering wide consultation on needs, priorities and aid management at the local, national and regional levels. This should enable parliamentarians inter alia to have a good command of the facts, dynamics and policies involved in aid.

2. Training in budget methodology and analysis, development programmes and public finance. This would mean providing technical assistance to develop the professional aptitudes of MPs. Parliaments must be in direct contact with donors and United Nations agency representatives on the ground to assist them, without going through the Executive, in understanding the policies and programmes put in place. At the very least, parliamentarians should know the exact sum of aid allocated to their countries and the priority areas earmarked for their use.

3. Support for reforming legal and legislative frameworks to better fight corruption and mismanagement. This concerns all parliamentary activities to enhance the laws governing the action of stakeholders involved in development assistance. These laws must also ensure that official assistance targets the poorest in keeping with the principles of equity and social justice.

4. Support for promoting a democratic culture and transparency. This implies the requisite support to facilitate the relations between civil society and parliaments, thereby allowing for oversight outside the confines of the political authorities. At this level, parliament could use civil society as an independent vector of information during the evaluation and monitoring phases of aid programmes. As a result, parliaments should be more open to civil society lobbying so that the real needs of the people are taken into consideration.

In conclusion, it is obvious that without aid, poor countries will encounter enormous difficulties on the path to development. Nevertheless, it appears that building the capacity of parliaments in developing countries is a key ingredient to enhance the quality and

effectiveness of official assistance. This is a step that cannot be avoided if the aim is to establish and strengthen management and oversight by the people of development assistance insofar as it is a public good.