Deepening Democratic Governance: Relevance of South-South Cooperation

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Abstract:

This resource is a summary of the talk Mr Roland Rich, Executive Head, UN Democracy Fund gave at PRIA (Society for Participatory Research in Asia), New Delhi on 30 March 2012. The talk titled “Deepening Democratic Governance: Relevance of South-South Cooperation” focused on five key, formative aspects of democracy and the role civil society can play in deepening these aspects. Some experiments in democracy from the global South that we can learn from and try to implement were also outlined.

This resource will be most useful when it is read along with the audio-visual resources of the talk available on the portal. The audio-visual resources are in three parts:

- **Part 1: Understanding Democracy**
  (http://www.practiceinparticipation.org/index.php/videos/151/73/understanding-democracy)

- **Part 2: Role of Civil Society in Deepening Democracy**

- **Part 3: South-South Cooperation: Learning from Experiences in Democracy**
  (http://www.practiceinparticipation.org/index.php/videos/151/78/south-south-cooperation-learnin)

PART 1: UNDERSTANDING DEMOCRACY

Roland Rich identified five key, formative aspects of democracy:

- **State-based democracy**: The only democracy that we know is state-based democracy. We do not have democracy at the global level. One of the key preconditions of a successful democracy is that it occurs in a state. A more meaningful way of understanding what a state is, is to go to Benedict Anderson’s ideas about nationalism. States are not what you create on a map; they are imagined communities. To have a successful democratic polity, its citizens have to have a common imagined community
of that state. Many places in the world cannot sustain democracy because they are not imagined communities.

- **The will of the people is the basis for the authority of government:** This is from the perspective of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. From the will of the people flows the other aspects of democracy we are familiar with – political parties, elections, parliaments, etc.

- **Democracy and rule of law are mutually constitutive:** One upholds the other. Clearly, we cannot have democracy without rule of law, but not as clearly in people’s minds and in fact, we cannot have rule of law without democracy, because the laws will not have legitimacy. It’s democracy that gives the laws legitimacy.

- **Horizontal accountability:** The key ingredient is separation of powers in the traditional sense. Modern democracies are becoming “monitoring democracies”. There are so many institutions to monitor one aspect or another of the democratic construct. All these institutions oversee each other; in some ways bolster one another, in other ways correct each other’s errors.

- **Vertical accountability:** Horizontal accountability is among institutions; vertical accountability is to the people.

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**PART 2: ROLE OF CIVIL SOCIETY IN DEEPENING DEMOCRACY**

In order to understand which aspects of democracy we should be deepening, Roland Rich first identified those aspects we do not want to deepen.

We do not want to deepen:

- **Partisanship:** The major problem for new democracy all over the world is deepening partisanship. We seem to have lost cross-party discussions and friendships that used to be part of older style democracy. Partisanship is a recipe for gridlock; it does not allow reform.

- **Money politics:** In the North, they thought the answer to money politics was public funding of elections. Many countries have adopted rules for public funding of election campaigns to get away from the problem, especially corporate funding of elections.

- **Shallowness of debates:** The level of deliberative debates should be healthy.

*We do want to deepen public involvement.* The indispensable requirement for a healthy democracy is public involvement.
Travelling around America in the 1830s, Alex de Tocqueville saw a society very different from the Old World, aristocratic, hierarchical Europe that he knew. In many ways, America of the 1830s is the global South – a new country devising new rules. Roland Rich draws from de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* in outlining the role of civil society in deepening public involvement (although de Tocqueville doesn’t use these exact phrases):

1. Civil society is a bulwark against tyranny.
2. It allows people to organize on the basis of common goals, not ascription. This is so important because in many countries (like India) people vote not because of what they believe, but because of who they are. They vote because they had qualities ascribed to them at birth – religion, language, locality, caste, etc. Civil society allows you to emerge from who you are into groups based on belief.
3. It gives individuals an effective voice by speaking in a larger context.
4. It allows individuals to aggregate their views. In a democracy, one person’s views will not affect things too much. If one person can influence a million people, you aggregate these views, and then you have influence. Civil society is the basis for that.
5. It allows for the contestation of ideas, the “marketplace of ideas”\(^1\) to occur.
6. It builds “social capital”.\(^2\)

By playing these roles, civil society can help strengthen and deepen the five aspects of democracy discussed in Part 1 because:

- Civil society helps gain a common imagination. You can build society, and a nation, through civil society.
- Civil society is important for the concept of the will of the people – both through elections and the deliberative process.
- Civil society is a vehicle for rule of law. Initially civil society doesn’t seem to be as important for this, but rule of law only works if a huge majority of people voluntarily abide by the law. This is the paradox – that rule of law works best where it is least needed – and civil society is good for this.
- Civil society demands horizontal accountability. Institutions need to be forced to do their job; civil society gets involved and monitors them.
- Civil society is the main actor for vertical accountability, to hold parliaments and institutions to their word.

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\(^1\) This is not de Tocqueville’s term. It was coined a hundred years later by an American judge, Oliver Wendal Holmes.

\(^2\) Again, not de Tocqueville’s term. This is a term used a lot by the World Bank.
We need to be evidence based. A marvelous piece of evidence is Alina Mungiu Pippidi’s study on the impact of different variables – laws, the UN convention against corruption, who were parties to various other conventions, presence of an anti-corruption office, the ombudsman office, etc – on corruption across 40 countries. This study found only two variables had an impact:

- **The strength of civil society**: Stronger the civil society in a country, lesser the corruption.
- **The right to information**: Transparency is the way to stop corruption, and this is the only law that has a direct relationship to lowering corruption. The right to information will be the key tool in the hands of civil society to deepen democracy.

PART 3: SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION: LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCES IN DEMOCRACY

Cooperation is a word taken for granted as something that we all engage in, but actually is a problematic concept. Can a nation learn from another nation’s mistakes? Or do they learn only from making their own mistakes? Does each nation somehow have to repeat the mistakes that others have made before they can learn the lessons themselves? If this is the case, then what does cooperation mean? Can you help another country in various ways?

Cooperation between nations does have meaning because ideas go beyond borders; ideas travel from people to people. And people are not constrained by nation-state boundaries on a map; they talk to each other and learn from each other. Even institutions can learn from each other. And when you put the institutions and people together, then nations should be able to learn from each other. We live in such a globalized world, it only makes sense to talk about things across borders. Let’s work on cooperation; there is some benefit to doing it.

South-South cooperation is in contra-distinction to North-South cooperation. In one sense, a lot of the “borrowing” has been North-South because of colonialism. There has been no study on this, but essentially every colonial entity borrowed the form of democracy and governance structure that its colonial master had.

The Third Wave of Democracy (which really begins only after the end of the Cold War) has been a period of great ferment and experimentation in designs of democratic institutions. This experimentation has taken place in the global South. In many ways this has deepened institutions and has also given a lot of institutions more legitimacy.

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3 The study can be accessed at [http://www.sida.se/PageFiles/39460/AC%20Evaluation%20%282011%29%20Contextual%20Choices%20in%20Fighting%20Corruption%20Lessons%20Learned.pdf](http://www.sida.se/PageFiles/39460/AC%20Evaluation%20%282011%29%20Contextual%20Choices%20in%20Fighting%20Corruption%20Lessons%20Learned.pdf)
Examples from the South can be more applicable and more acceptable. South-South cooperation is a more appropriate concept because the entities have all begun at a similar time and are learning in a similar way. Some praiseworthy examples of institutions from the global South we can all learn from are:

- **Participatory budgeting**: This has clearly worked in Brazil and can travel, depending on whether a country wants to experiment in participatory budgeting. It is an institution well worth the effort of cooperating on.

- **Modern constitutional creation process** – Although the concept of the constitution is ancient, the modern process of drafting a constitution is very much a global South phenomenon with constitutional commissions, public interest in it, public debates on the process, dealing with issues in far greater depth, sometimes including concepts of national aspirations as a goal, etc.

- **Judicial activism**: South Africa and India, and to some extent the Philippines, have developed this to a tremendous degree.

- **Fourth branch of government**: Invented by Thailand to take care of political corruption. A range of oversight institutions were set up. To guard these institutions, they set up a non-partisan Senate. Even though it didn’t eventually work, it is an innovative concept from the global South.

- **Active and self-regulated civil society sector**: Key to its viability in the Philippines is tax deductibility for contributions. Tax deductibility is a powerful instrument. In the hands of the government, it creates a gatekeeper, with political and/or corruption implications. In the Philippines, this was delegated to the civil society sector itself – it had to organize itself, it has to determine which new entrant has tax deductibility, and the government accepts the decision of the self-regulating civil society sector.

- **Civil society scorecard**: A corruption scorecard created by Korean civil society for each parliamentarian. Disseminated through a free media this can become a very powerful tool.