

Zambia - foreign aid and democratic consolidation

© UN Photo/Staton Winter

KEY FINDINGS

- Democracy assistance and donor support have been key in fostering a new type of civil society, dominated by NGOs, the legal community and churches.
- The bulk of donor funding to Zambia is channelled to the executive through budget support, this has the potential to increase the concentration of power in government and the donors at the expense of the civil society.
- The president's prerogative for allocation of government resources provides members of parliament with strong incentives to follow the executive in key policy decisions.

After the democratic transfer of power from the one party government of the United National Independence Party in 1991 Zambia was heralded as a model of African democracy. In 2011 the now main opposition party, Patriotic Front, won an election victory thus making Zambia one of the select group of African nations that have experienced two peaceful electoral turnovers. However institutional reforms have not produced effective watchdogs or counter forces to prevent state malpractice and corruption and over time increasing amounts of power have been concentrated in the executive office.

Foreign aid and Zambia – the evolving dynamic

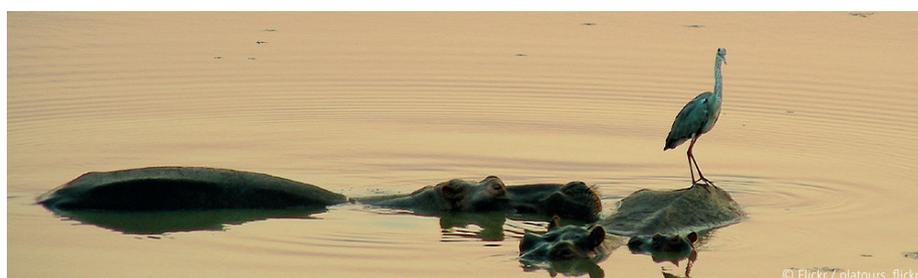
Since the World Bank became involved in economic reform in Zambia in 1983 aid conditionality has been an important part of the Zambian political equation. Although the Zambian government has at times protested against the set conditions, and attempted to go it alone, it has always had to go back to the negotiating table with the donor community led by the IMF and the World Bank.

In the late 1990s donors began to include support for human rights and democratization in their portfolios and a number democracy support initiatives were introduced in Zambia too. These measures show some signs of success. There has been an increase in the number of people with access to their MPs, constituency offices have been established and citizens are to some extent able to follow parliamentary proceedings. While in recent years government and civil society assistance have been comparatively well supported the pledges are still often geared towards

elections and thus are more focused on electoral events than on building democratic institutions and political culture.

An increased alignment in donor priorities in Zambia since 2002 coincided with a growing consensus about Zambia's commitment to economic development. This alignment initially occurred amongst the Nordic plus countries, over time it has incorporated more agencies including the multilateral agencies, the World Bank and the UN system. This new aid dynamic has resulted in the bulk of donor funding being channelled to the executive through poverty reduction budget support, this has the potential to increase the concentration of power in government and the donors at the expense of the civil society.

Furthermore, there are two recent changes in Zambia that suggest that development aid may become a less dominant feature of the public finances and thus debate and policy-making. First the proportion of aid allocated to Zambia per person has shrunk and Zambia's dependency on aid has reduced due to economic growth and debt relief. Second the entry of new development partners, such as China, has the potential to make Zambia more reluctant to enter into development aid agreements that carry political conditionalities.



© Flickr / plateaus_flickr

Zambia's democratic trajectory 1991-2011

It can be argued that the main success story of development aid in Zambia since the early 1990s is the deregulation of the central elements of its economy, and the laying of the foundations for the shift from a state-orientated to a market economic system. The fact that these reforms have been sustained, in contrast to the unstable economic reforms of the 1980s, is clearly linked to the presence of donors and donor agreements. In terms of Zambia's democratic trajectory in the same period the two key features have been the increase in open and free debate amongst political parties and civil society groups, and on the other hand the continued executive dominance.

Open and free - trends of political debate

Zambia today has a civil society which is able to act in unison and mobilize around key issues of political and economic governance. Democracy assistance and donor support has been key in fostering a new type of civil society dominated by NGOs, the legal community and churches. A good example of Zambia's new civil society in action is The Oasis Forum. The Oasis forum was supported by donors and included a number of NGOs as well as opposition political parties. It was successful in its initial goal of opposing President Chiluba's attempt to change the constitution and run for a third term and continued to campaign issues of constitutional reform for five or six years.

Democracy support directed at the enhancement of institutions of restraint within government has also been significant. The Audit Office, anti-corruption agencies and parliament have all benefited from financial aid, capacity building and technical assistance. While this support has been criticized for failing to fully understand the informal links between political patronage and corruption the transfer of ideas and the legitimacy conferred by aid should not be underestimated or dismissed outright.

Executive dominance

Despite the evident increase in open and free debate, executive dominance continues to be a problem in Zambia. The president's prerogative for allocation of government resources provides members of parliament with strong incentives to give their support in questions of policy to the executive. The president also maintains far reaching decision

making authority, control of public appointments and veto power over decisions made in parliament. In parliament the speaker and ruling party are dominant when it comes to selecting committee members and setting the agenda. The incumbents ability to 'buy off' individual MPs has further undermined the effectiveness of opposition parties.

The improvements in civil society described above are real but organizations struggle to enforce accountability in the face of a dominant executive. One of the key demands of the aforementioned Oasis Forum was constitutional reform; while a constitutional reform process was started it ultimately failed due to the political manipulation and delaying tactics of the administration. Civil society groups are also finding it increasingly difficult to have their voice heard due to an increasingly polarized political environment.

Conclusion

Although independent agencies of restraint have undoubtedly been strengthened by aid, the Zambian government has tended to withdraw its support for these institutions in parallel with donors. This suggests that these agencies would not be adequately funded by government if donor support for them was completely withdrawn. Direct support to political parties and parliament has also been limited compared to the overall amount of aid transfers going to directly to the government. As a result aid, even transfers intended to enhance governance, risks undermining democratic processes and enhancing the position of the incumbent.

It is clear that on balance democracy assistance has strengthened formal institutions and enhanced the ability of civil society and the public in general to monitor the actions of government. However going forward democracy assistance should be much more explicit about its aim to enhance the capacity of formal political processes and stakeholders both outside and inside government in order to address the problem of continued executive dominance.



IMPLICATIONS

- **Strengthening stakeholders and institutions that can hold the executive to account, both outside and inside government, should be the focus for democracy assistance going forward.**

*This Research Brief is based on
WIDER Working Paper 2012/16
'Foreign Aid and Democratic
Consolidation in Zambia'
by Lise Rakner.*

