

WHOSE AID? THE CASE OF THE BOLIVIAN ELECTIONS PROJECT¹

Rosalind Eyben with Rosario León.

‘Rather than being merely ornamental, a dab of local colour, protagonists’ narratives about their own conduct merit serious attention as forms of social analysis’ (Rosaldo, 1993:143)

Introduction

It has been suggested that the anthropology of development is shifting from critical understanding to moral reflection, with development conceived ‘as daily rout and relationships that cope with disjunctures’ (Ufford et al. 2003:19). Accompanying this shift is a corresponding interest in development as ‘power’, not so much in the Foucauldian sense, already extensively explored in the 1990’s but rather in terms of actual relationships between differently positioned development actors (Groves and Hinton 2004, Pasteur and Scott Villiers 2004). This chapter is based on one such relationship, between two middle-aged women differently positioned in the aid nexus. I was British and head of the Bolivian country office of the Department for International Development (DFID) and Rosario was Bolivian, an academic researcher and consultant sociologist for aid agencies.

Whose aid? Through multiple encounters and struggles over roles and responsibilities, staff working for donor and recipient governments constantly reformulate and re-interpret their answers to this question. Rosario and I were protagonists in one such struggle over a project to support the 2002 national elections in Bolivia. This experience led to our understanding aid as a gift, problematic and ambiguous in meaning in which relations of power are imbued with moral purpose.

The material for our narrative is not based on formal, designed-in-advance research but on our lived experience – an experience that initiated our subsequent friendship. Each took rough notes and has copies of some official documents. Nevertheless, our principal source is a recollection of events through structured conversations in July 2003 and based on principles of second person inquiry (Reason and Bradbury 2001). This encouraged a further process of first person inquiry, individually and separately examining our actions, ideas, values and emotions at that time, seeking to position ourselves as subjects of our own analysis.

It is difficult enough to describe and explain ourselves. How much harder it is to represent third persons, those who were not consulted about our writing of this story and who, if asked, might provide a very different analysis of their and our roles. We hope that should they read what follows, they will be provoked to make their own analysis of the dilemmas of aid, recognising that our choices are shaped not only by bureaucratic policy requirements but by our own history, values and social relationships.

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This chapter is in two voices. Mine is the main one with a complementary perspective and reflection from Rosario, written in Spanish and translated by me. In the first section, we reflect on our own positionality at the time of our story and then describe our role as protagonists in a project we helped design. We conclude by considering the possibilities and quandaries in the aid relationship that this story reveals to us.

SETTING THE SCENE

Introducing Ourselves

In October 2001, the DFID office in Bolivia commissioned an external review of its performance. It found that DFID was strong in analytical capacity and willingness to engage in difficult or emerging issues but that some partners believed it sometimes misjudged the timing and pace of its actions: ‘pushing too hard and insensitive to the political moment’ (DFID 2002:8). It was a crucial moment in the design of a project to support the right of socially excluded populations to vote in the June 2002 national elections. The reviewers’ oblique comments reflect the first, but not the last moment of crisis.

That October I was coming towards the end of my second year in Bolivia, after thirteen years in DFID’s London headquarters leading a group advising on the societal dimensions of development (Eyben 2003). The 1990’s had appeared very positive for someone like me, with the recognition of rights based approaches and the international decision to define poverty reduction as the principal purpose of aid. Nevertheless, by the end of the decade I was bored. It seemed time to return to living in the ‘developing world’. I chose Bolivia because it was one of the pilot Poverty Reduction Strategy countries and because Latin America would be a new experience. With a relatively small budget to manage an intriguing aspect of my future work was whether relationship building would be more significant for effective aid than the transfer of resources. Yet, my Spanish was sufficiently poor to be unable to appreciate many of the subtleties in the web of relationships of which I was to become part.

I had been considering other options, including two that would have promoted me to a more senior and influential position in the international aid system. My ultimate decision to turn my back on relative power and status may have led me to a sense of irresponsibility and a desire for fun - possibly a preparedness not to behave in a normal bureaucratic manner wearing a mask of impersonal discretion. However, my interest in personal power did not disappear. I enjoyed making a difference. Very rapidly after my arrival, I identified the opportunity for exerting influence offered by the management of the relatively small DFID programme in Bolivia.

For eleven years I, Rosario, had coordinated the Bolivian component of the Forests Trees and People Programme (FTTP) of the FAO, a global programme supported by nine international donors. FTTP’s role was to create links between local populations and state institutions to support the realization of people’s rights to manage their natural resources.

In one sense I was also a donor because I managed funds and could decide with whom the programme would work. I could influence and sometimes define the agenda. Nevertheless, within my managerial role and because of FTTP’s underlying

philosophy, this experience had encouraged me to develop a participatory approach of facilitation and respectful relationships in the construction of development projects.

I experienced also the pain of introducing innovation and of not following established procedures. I discovered in this programme the tension between the potential for introducing change and the tendency for nothing to change should existing privileges be put at risk.

These tensions translated into pressure from some of our donors and for the first time I witnessed the 'clothing of power' when we sat at the negotiating table in Rome with powerful donors who while recognizing the success of the programme and its innovatory character, failed to understand the participatory management model in which funds went straight from FAO to civil society organizations, by-passing the usual procedural relations between an international agency and the State.

When FTTP came to an end in 2001 I returned to CERES, of which I had been a member since it was founded in 1981. CERES is committed to the pursuit of social justice and like any institute doing social research in Bolivia is entirely dependent on foreign financing for its work, hoping to persuade donors to support programmes that the researchers believe are important.

The aid context

In 2000, DFID expanded its office with Bolivian and UK-based specialists; we also hired Bolivian consultants for specific tasks. In this respect our office was similar to those of most official aid agencies in La Paz. Because expatriate staff stay in the country for a short time, an agency's capacity to influence policy depends considerably on the knowledge and political connections of its Bolivian staff and consultants. Some, such as Rosario, are from academia, but many have been in government service under a previous administration and will return there again in the future. Most are part of a white elite that has traditionally run the country. They are connected through ties of kinship and affinity. Retolaza argues (2004) that their interest in the donor presence in the country, is both to enhance their present and future career opportunities as well as to pursue their own political agendas inside and outside government. Through their social networks they fund each other, exchange information, and, as the case may be, provide or propose short consultancies. "Whatever is required to maintain the patronage and *compadrazgo*² system flowing: keeping the new patron happy, maintaining the *status quo*." (Retolaza 2004: 15)

We expatriates had our own social network, one that covered the world. It is a community of value and practice, knitted together in a global web of personal relationships that had a local dimension here in La Paz. (Eyben 2003) In La Paz, we lived in the same neighbourhoods, meeting socially in the evenings and picnicking in the weekend. While each had their own networks, the two elites, Bolivian and expatriate, were socially connected. We lived and shopped in the same part of town, used the same sports clubs and schools and met at parties. The global trend towards

² *Compadrazgo* is the relationship between the parents and godparents of a child but is used in Bolivia in a wider sense of the affective relationships that characterise the country's clientelistic political and economic system.

donor coordination and recipient government ownership helped reinforce these connections and the sentiments of friendship and trust that came with them.

Bolivia was an exemplar of the new style of international aid relations, based on 'partnership' that had evolved at the turn of the century. It pioneered the Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) for donor-recipient relations (World Bank 2003) and was among the first highly indebted poor countries to produce a Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) to secure debt relief.

The theme of the PRSP and the associated 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. The democratically elected government, rather than donors, should decide on public expenditure; aid would only be welcome if integrated into the public expenditure decision-making process.

The Vice-Ministry for Public Investment and External Assistance co-ordinated foreign aid. 'VIPFE' enthusiastically promoted the new donor rhetoric that the recipient government be 'in the driving seat'. 2001 had been a high point for VIPFE, when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund endorsed the PRSP. I had played a significant role in the PRSP process. Drawing on my headquarters experience of international negotiations, I took the lead in convening the bilateral aid agencies in Bolivia to secure a PRSP that reflected our concerns (Eyben 2004).

One of these concerns, close to my heart, was social exclusion, of which one aspect related to the fact that not all Bolivians possessed identity cards, which prevented them voting in the 2002 elections. While pondering whether DFID could do anything about this, Rosario, someone whom I knew by repute but had never met came to see me. It was a moment of political crisis when one of the recurrent *campesino* (peasant) protests was threatening to blockade La Paz. In my journal I noted that Rosario mentioned how these events were an expression of problems of citizenship.

The political disenchantment

My 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 were in crisis. Their historical position as intellectuals at the service of social justice, democracy, social change, and the 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 our feelings of impotency, dependency, domination and exclusion when we saw how the donors closed a circle of negotiations with the bureaucratic and technocratic elites, with very few spaces opened for civil society. Through Bolivia's Comprehensive Development Framework were created codes of interaction and conditions of accessibility to external financing that were little known or understood by those of us 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 we were recruited as consultants to produce knowledge for 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 disillusion, the feelings of impotency and disenchantment with the forms of doing politics, had also influenced many others in Bolivian society.

Bolivia was preparing for its elections with everything that this implies in Bolivia. As usual different interest groups were mobilized by political parties. However, this time 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",³

"It's the same ones as always with the same tricks",

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

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.

The almost perfect democratic machinery, operated by elitist, clientelist and patrimonial political habits, was challenged once again, after many years, by the emergence of social struggles, social mobilizations, particularly inspired by the demand for political, economic and cultural rights. This all signalled 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.

In this context, searching for a way out of the crisis, as well as allies to develop a different approach, I visited various government offices and donor agencies without securing any positive response. My years with FAO had left me outside the circle of known consultants. During that time I had worked with many grass roots organisations throughout the whole country but when the time came to negotiate support for a more inclusive election process it appeared as if I did not know anyone in 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. Eventually I came to the DFID office and after considerable insistence the secretary of the head of the DFID office gave me an appointment with Rosalind in July, three months after my original request.

The donor perspective

The extent to which Bolivia had achieved substantive democracy remained questionable (Whitehead, 2000). Bolivia's mainstream political parties had

³ 'Chola' is a Bolivian woman of highland indigenous origin who dresses in a long voluminous skirt, with a shawl and bowler hat.

organisational structures reaching down to the local level to ‘mobilise’ votes, including through the use of patronage (Lazar 2004). Rather than through the electoral process, however, demonstrations, road blockades, hunger strikes and other forms of direct action appeared to be more effective in gaining concessions and policy change. By 2001, the leaders of the strikes and demonstrations were gaining greater popularity and their recently established marginalised (‘asystemic’) political parties could be seen as a potential threat to the cosy parliamentary arrangements of the politicians whom the staff of VIPFE served.

Although ‘exclusion’ was mentioned in the PRSP to satisfy the requirements of the donors, the policy commitment was weak. That DFID had gained a reputation for being interested in exclusion did not necessarily mean for VIPFE that DFID should support activities to which VIPFE did not accord priority. Here lay the seeds of future disagreements.

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. Rather an unwritten and not discussed *modus vivendi* had been established, based on the fiction that bilateral donors provided government-to-government aid whereas private citizens through their countries’ NGOs, supported civil society in aid recipient countries. In fact most of these northern NGOs were heavily reliant on funding from their governments.

I saw this *modus vivendi* as not only hypocritical but injurious. The Bolivian PRSP had noted that poverty reduction could not be achieved without joined up efforts by state and society. Yet donors themselves were maintaining two streams of funding relations that could only widen the breach between state and society. Thus, I proposed that DFID’s strategy in Bolivia would be to support state and society actors achieve an increased mutual comprehension of their respective roles and responsibilities in achieving poverty reduction (DFID, 2002:9). Through a single budget, DFID would openly fund both government and civil society programmes. Support to next year’s elections would be a case in point.

Designing the election project: the consultant’s perspective

In my previous conversations with staff in other donor agencies I had always left, disappointed that the theme of exclusion was not on their policy influencing agenda. However, this time there might be more of a chance. I decided to speak directly and forcefully in DFID about my concerns. I told Rosalind I was profoundly disturbed by the invisibility of many people in Bolivia, that they did not even have the right to be part of—and actually were not part of their own 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.

I was surprised that unlike some of my other meetings with donors, Rosalind did not dismiss my concerns to establish on which side of the table sat the power. Rather I saw an enthusiastic face and doubted my own eyesight. We talked for more than 45 minutes. After this meeting, I was invited to do a consultancy assignment on this issue. I felt the outcome had been positive, not only for that reason but also for the way in which the relationship was developing.

So, I had joined the circle of the favoured 'few' who received contracts from donor agencies. To justify this to myself I felt I had to do something that would be really useful for the 'many'.

THE ELECTIONS PROJECT

The previous year DFID had designed an elections project in Peru funding NGOs to provide voters' education. I envisaged something similar in Bolivia. However, the project would have to be designed differently. The Peruvian government had been happy for DFID to select the NGOs it wanted to support and to fund and manage its own project. Such an approach in Bolivia would have appeared very strange and unwelcome. Interested civil society organisations would need to come together on their own initiative and to approach donors. They had to 'own' the process. How could we get them to own something that they did not know could exist? Organising a seminar might stimulate an interest and be the first step to designing a project.

We also had to make sure there was sufficient money. DFID alone did not have enough. Furthermore we had to work within the principles of donor co-ordination. A project funded solely by DFID would contravene evolving good practice. It would also over-expose us in what might prove a risky enterprise with political ramifications. But before approaching other donors, we needed to know whom to invite to the seminar.

DFID contracted me to map the civil society networks who were working on issues of exclusion and voice. I noted the frustration and feeling of impotency of many of those I interviewed in relation to their current difficulties in tackling exclusion and their enthusiasm to find new ways to do so. The theme of identity cards would immediately come up.

Another factor constantly mentioned was donors' behaviour. Donors supported parallel and diverse activities, making NGOs compete for funds. Grass roots organisations also 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." Then they quickly added that the time had come for people to vote for themselves, rather than for the politicians.

I discovered more than 50 Bolivian civil society organisations that had an interest and experience in education on citizens' rights and obligations. I found that the work of these organisations was diminished through a lack of coordination of the resources. At the same time, I found a keen interest among a number of these organisations to join their efforts into a more strategic approach. My meeting with these organisations and starting to bring them together to work collectively gave me back my sense of power.

Enlisting support in La Paz

I asked other donors whether in principle they would like to join a basket fund⁴ for a civil society project for the elections. Two agreed - the Dutch, with whom the DFID office had been working very closely on a number of shared activities and the Swedes, who were interested in social exclusion. We were still unclear about our precise objectives. Thus, we met in August to draft a project document and logical framework to establish some common agreement. We also agreed the amount of money we would put in the basket. Ironically, for a project that was meant to be owned by an, as yet unaware civil society, we had apparently already firmly set the parameters. Our draft project document accompanied the invitation to the civil society organisations - identified through Rosario's mapping exercise - to participate in a seminar in October.

It was difficult to draft the invitation letter. I stressed the exchange of experiences with Peru; I 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 I stressed that despite our having drafted a project document, the parameters of the project had not been set. To secure greater legitimacy I noted that the Electoral Commission and the Ombudswoman's office (whom I had consulted) would be participating in the seminar. With some nervousness, I copied the letter to VIPFE on the grounds of transparency concerning our intentions to fund civil society, but *not* asking permission to do so.

VIPFE reacted more angrily than any of us had anticipated. The Vice Minister wrote a very strong letter accusing all three donor agencies but 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. The usual courteous and high-flown language of official correspondence between government and official donor had disappeared.

Reading that letter was one of the nastiest moments in a long professional career. My colleagues in the DFID office were anxious that we might be getting into serious trouble. Was this the start of a diplomatic incident? With fear and trepidation, I exerted my personal authority, based on my previous leadership role in the PRSP process, to convince my Swedish and Dutch colleagues that we should continue with our plans for the seminar.

By unfortunate coincidence, the seminar was to be held the day after the independent team reviewing DFID's country strategy had an appointment with VIPFE who used the seminar as an illustration of DFID's bad behaviour:

'The seminar is unacceptable. We were invited to go but will not do so. The election theme is very important to us but they should have organised it differently, in co-ordination with the government.'

⁴ A basket fund is when different donors put their money into a single 'basket' so that the recipient has a single fund to draw down on and does not have to report separately to the different donors. They are still relatively rare but very much favoured in principle at that time in Bolivia (see Nickson 2002)

‘DFID has a donor-driven approach as they don’t have confidence in their counterpart [the government] – this is the basis of a partnership, of any relationship.’ (Ladbury et al. 2002:19)

Establishing a civil society consortium

I do not remember clearly Rosalind’s problems with VIPFE. Perhaps at the time I was unaware. On the other hand, I did notice the insecurity felt by the other donors and the challenge of agreeing to innovative methods.

Eighteen of the civil society organisations participating at the seminar decided to form a consortium that was then to take on a life of its own. I was asked to act as facilitator, funded by DFID. Aware of the time pressure, the Consortium 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, Rosario encouraged them not to proceed with my original idea of a ‘challenge fund’ model where they would have had to compete against each other but to design an overall programme with members responsible for implementation in their respective localities. Thus, they developed a mode of working based on principles of solidarity rather than on the donor-favoured market-based model. By December the Consortium and the donors had agreed a project whereby a committee chosen by the 18 members of the Consortium would be responsible for the direction of the project and an international non governmental organisation (INGO) would be selected by the donors, in consultation with the Consortium to administer the funds.

By channelling the donors’ money through the INGOs’ office back in the capital city in the North we could maintain 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 the Netherlands and with VIPFE’s blessing agreed to provide some money to the Electoral Commission through the United Nations. I hoped that such support would serve as some kind of protection for the civil society consortium. Nevertheless, I now realise that VIPFE was working behind the scenes to stop the project.

Crisis

By December, the project design had been completed. We hoped to 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, Denmark had become interested and joined the donors, increasing the size of the financial basket.

Then, unexpectedly, in the New Year, the Netherlands and Denmark began to show real concerns. Their senior national Bolivian governance specialists identified new conditions for securing their agencies’ support. These included ensuring the approval of the Government with letters of support from the vice-ministries of gender, indigenous people and popular participation, as well as from the police, the Electoral Commission and the Ombudswoman. Another condition required that the members

of the Consortium demonstrate they were not representing particular political parties. Aware that time was of essence the Consortium leaders pulled all their personal and political strings to meet these conditions.

By now it was early February. The Dutch and Danish Embassies were surprised and it seemed to us disconcerted that all the conditions had been met - and that the imposition of these conditions had usefully resulted in a project that was less risky and had broader based support. Abruptly the Dutch, followed by the Danes, announced their withdrawal from the project and on new grounds. Their Bolivian governance specialists 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 the project's on-the-ground activities in marginal and remote areas of the country.

We received the news with amazement, grief and anger. Rumours and allegations flew around La Paz. Accusations were made about the influence and counter-influence of *compadrazgo*. Different kinds of power and understanding were at play in a serious crisis of conflicting loyalties. The Consortium held an emergency meeting with DFID and Sida. Civil society leaders made emotional speeches about their effort to respond to all the donor concerns. They spoke of their despair and incomprehension that the project was to be abandoned at this late stage. They asked whether Sida and DFID were prepared to go ahead without the others. Recognising the budget would have to be seriously cut, the consortium expressed willingness to redesign the project, provided some funding could be guaranteed.

For me and my companions in the Consortium it was difficult to understand how aid, destined for reducing poverty, could not be delivered in the most expeditious fashion to the people in society best equipped to use it. We sadly observed and wondered why some Bolivian aid officials were the first to put difficulties in our way. Only now, do I realise that the Consortium, a coming together of a diverse set of organisations, was not a good 'client' and that the aid negotiations in this project had led us down new paths, by-passing patrimonial control.

My priority now was to ensure that my colleagues in the DFID office and back in London would continue to support me. I told them that DFID could not take the political risk of being seen to fund this project when all other donors had withdrawn but that we should proceed provided Sida stayed with us. After thinking about it for three tense days, the head of the Sida office agreed the Swedes would not quit. My sense of relief was enormous.

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 the two donors who dropped out. The emotional strain and the need to work together at a time of crisis produced interesting and unexpected consequences. Consortium members said that their alliance had been strengthened through adversity. They felt they now truly 'owned' the project. They also looked at DFID and Sida in a different light, treating us 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 ours. Our fallibility and internal disputes had made us more human. There was more

trust among everyone who stayed the course; the crisis formed a firm basis for Rosario's and my friendship.

The rest of the donor community looked on with interest as the head of the Dutch aid section and I, formerly great allies during the PRSP process, avoided each other at official receptions. I was told that people were asking whether I would ever talk to him again.... I realised that my cordial relations and personal authority within the donor community had significantly diminished. That I was largely unconcerned by this must be attributable to my already having decided to leave my job in DFID and join IDS. If my situation had been otherwise I might not have been prepared to suffer this damage to my own social and political network.

The project's emphasis was on the right to an identity card. On a visit with Rosario to one of the areas where the Consortium was active and listening all morning to how people struggled to obtain these cards I concluded that the State was making citizens pay with blood, tears and scarce money for the errors itself had committed. Personal horror stories were told with passion and grief. In a separate paper, Rosario has analysed the exclusionary effects of the lack of identity cards (León et al. 2003: 4). 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 of the State's denial of their identity. This project could make a difference.

It seemed that I had made the right choice but in the next section, I consider some of the quandaries and quagmires of this decision in the circumstances of a donor supporting civil society against the wishes of the host government.

THE AMBIGUITIES OF DONOR-RECIPIENT RELATIONS

Aid as a gift of patronage?

Bolivia is understood by foreigners and Bolivians alike as a society based on the personal relationship of the gift rather than one of impersonal relations of entitlement. Thus foreign aid that started life as tax on citizens of the North, becomes part of a complex local set of gift relationships and struggles for power and patronage. By deciding to ignore the wishes of the representatives of the elected government was I not reaffirming DFID's patronage role, giving and taking away aid as I saw fit rather than as the host country government saw fit? My personal discretion was large. If someone else had been head of the DFID office at that time, it is possible that a different decision would have been made.

Aid conceived as a gift has few friends in the world of development practice because it illuminates through power relations, the personal, the relational and the emotional. While the liberal economist prefers to see it as an investment, the rights-based practitioner and most Bolivians I have spoken to would like it to become an entitlement. Both perspectives 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. The rights-based perspective equally prefers 'ownership' because it implies an inalienable entitlement, administered by a rational bureaucracy.

Conceiving aid as a gift 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)

Gifts are ambiguous with irreducible elements of morality that shape their character. (Mirowski 2001). A gift always has an intention behind it – and therefore has an interest. On the other hand, if the intention is moral or sacred, then the gift can be judged as disinterested. Givers, such as priests, see themselves as a vehicle or intermediary in the delivery of a gift from God (Appadurai, 1985). I saw myself as such a disinterested giver, an intermediary, acting on behalf of the taxpayer. My donor patronage was both personal and sacred.

Gifts have a further ambiguity. As an expression of the sacred or the moral, they recognise the social bond between donor and recipient. But that same recognition can be imbued with sentiments of power and even aggression. As noted in a recent discussion on this subject with the former Ombudswoman, the recipient may be powerless to refuse the gift (Callari, 2002, Amariglio, 2002). This paradox is very clear in the aid relationship. No recipient government or NGO wants to be aid-dependent, attributing their status to the unjust way in which powerful countries manage the world's economy.

Whose aid?

The strong sentiments of VIPFE staff about 'donor-driven' projects reflected their wish for control, not to be pushed around by donors to whom they have to be polite. 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 in theory an attempt to establish such a contract, providing a guaranteed flow of resources to the recipient. That it does not do so in practice, is evidenced by DFID's decision in late 2003 to cut back significantly its aid to Bolivia.

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'. (Jerve, 2002:394)

If the Bolivian government is understood as the arbiter for the aid given to the country, then its ownership of the elections project was minimal. Although the weak vice-ministries of gender and indigenous affairs expressed support, VIPFE in the Ministry of Finance, and the Presidency, objected. DFID's only defence is that the project appears to have had a bigger impact on Bolivia than most other elements of British aid. It was for this reason that in the special newspaper supplement for the

Queen's Birthday in Bolivia in 2003 and twelve months after my departure, it was this project that took pride of place.⁵

The disagreement between DFID and the Dutch Embassy exemplified the donor dilemma. The head of the Dutch aid section acknowledged the dubious legitimacy of the regime as one that political scientists would term 'a minimally institutionalised state' (Moore & Putzel 1999). We did not disagree over the analysis but over the appropriate response. I argued that because the Poverty Reduction Strategy was unviable if many poor people were excluded from the democratic political process, donors should be supporting simultaneously not only the elected government but also those civil society organisations who were seeking to give poor people a stronger voice - even if government officials objected to our doing this.

However, that viewpoint exposed DFID to the accusation of over-interference in another country's affairs and of undermining the concept of the government in the driving seat. Both DFID and the Netherlands aid ministry were global leaders in the new 'partnership' agenda. Up until this crisis, I had been working closely and enthusiastically with my Dutch colleague in pursuit of that agenda. The elections project forced us to make choices. By deciding to initiate and then support the Consortium, I had broken the very rules of the game to which I had been actively subscribing. It was a clear case of DFID claiming it knew better than the Bolivian government as to how to spend its aid. VIPFE was correct: the elections project was 'donor-driven'.

When he appreciated how unhappy VIPFE was with this initiative, and from my prior knowledge of him, I understand that my counterpart in the Dutch Embassy decided that national ownership should be given priority. I imagine he saw 'ownership', as a fundamental innovation in the relations between donor and recipient; so important it should not be undermined, even for a good cause. 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 and the capriciousness of the gift. National ownership would strengthen the State's capacity to govern.

CONCLUSION

Reflections of a passionate bureaucrat

A structural analysis might conclude that by seeking to prevent more poor people voting VIPFE was protecting the interests of the elite that it served. VIPFE's explicit objection to the project had been couched in terms of DFID breaking the CDF principles of national ownership. More informally, I was told that I was interfering naively in political processes about which I knew nothing. This was of course largely the case. I knew very little, other than through what Rosario and her friends told me. I had decided to trust their judgement rather than VIPFE's.

If I had been less ignorant, would I have been more hesitant? Starting with an ill-informed social analysis that drew on general principles rather than context-specific

⁵ I am told that the project is also frequently cited by DFID head office and Ministers as an example of how British aid tackles social exclusion.

knowledge, did I continue my commitment by drawing on another form of knowing, what Reason (1998) refers to as experiential knowledge, gained through empathy and resonance? Did this lead me to trust 'intuitively' in Rosario and the Consortium?

Katja Jassey argues that because 'clumsy donors and bureaucrats' are also passionate people who can be as eager at networking, making friends and promoting change as the next person, development agencies need to have some rules so as to protect taxpayers' money and to stop individual staff members using their power without accountability (2004: 132). What the modern civil service calls evidence - Reason's (1998) propositional knowledge - supports such rule-based decision-making. Interestingly, I made the decision to continue with the project without any substantive evidence because no one had been interested to collect it. It was the project, once implemented, that revealed the facts that very high numbers of people were denied their right to an identity. The information gathered by the Consortium showed that of a total of 26,418 inhabitants of the 618 rural and peri-urban communities where the project was implemented, just 9% had their personal documentation in order, while 91% were facing documentation problems, that denied them not only the right to vote but many other of their economic, social and civil rights (León et al. 2003:10)

While I was driven by passion, it was what Jassey describes as my 'personal and institutional power' (2004: 132) that enabled me to act. I was shocked that VIPFE regarded citizens' political exclusion as a minor matter, allegedly affecting very few people. I was angry, and my resolve was hardened, when an intermediary communicated to me informally (at a cocktail party where all such business is done) that if people did not have identity cards it was because they were opting out of their responsibilities as citizens.

This chapter started by referring to the emotions of the project's protagonists. The Consortium lived the only too common experience of aid being offered and then withdrawn. The ownership of aid remained with the donor. 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 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.

Rosario's reflections

I have found it difficult to think about myself at a certain time and within a certain set of relationships and above all it is not easy to recollect vivid emotion. There is a persistent tendency to analyse rather than feel the past and only in a passionate conversation with Rosalind was I first able to look at myself. I have continued since then and in other conversations with young researchers here in Bolivia only then? did my memory start to learn. By recollecting these emotions I can appreciate the implications of those games of donor-recipient relations, games of which at the time we were unaware.

With this project I had the power to think and design proposals. And the Consortium had gained the power to constrain the bureaucracy's clientelist management of

foreign aid. Once DFID and Sida had decided to continue with the project, despite the objections of the government, perhaps the most significant act was their preparedness to change the design of the original project. 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, I think that systems of exclusion will tend to endure.

My experience with this project has a special significance for me because it demonstrated the possibilities of transforming the relations that knit together the world of development. What happened in the two years after is another story to be told later.

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