

Strengthening Democracy and Civil Society: **What has the Ford Foundation learned?**

**Transcript of speech by Michael Edwards
given to trusts and foundations in the UK
London, 10 March, 2008**

What does the Governance and Civil Society Program consist of, just to give you some basic information as background for the rest of the conversation?

- \$100 - \$120 million a year, 50% in the USA, 50% through 10 out of 12 regional offices in Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East (all except Moscow and Lagos).
- Nineteen Program Officers (8 in New York including 3 with global portfolios . global economic governance, global civil society (Lisa Jordan) and social justice philanthropy (Chris Harris who many of you know).
- Approximately 250 grants per year, with an average grant size of \$3-400,000, though grants actually range between \$50,000 and \$2-3 million.
- A common philosophy and program framework across the world, including the United States (no North-South separation or foreign aid mentality, which I think is one of our strongest features)

It isn't a huge program, but it has enough resources to make a difference if used strategically. In the time I have available I can only give you a taste of the work we support and pull out some key lessons and challenges. The program has three core objectives:

- Strengthening civic and political participation, the basic energy that drives democracy worldwide. That encompasses both a political system that guarantees equal voting rights and effective representation and a civil society that is strong and inclusive enough to exert pressure from below.
- Making systems of governance more effective and transparent, by reforming existing political institutions or inventing new ones to deal with problems of inequity and insecurity. That includes both governments that see themselves as instruments for equity and social justice and are accountable for their actions; and non-state actors that are required to animate the mixed governance systems that will become increasingly common.
- Making philanthropy work for peace and social justice, so that civil society has the means to carry out its role effectively now and in the future.

Putting it very simply, our role is to help to build, sustain and deepen democratic institutions worldwide. Civil society is central to that task. And philanthropy is a vital support for civil society.

But we don't see democracy as a universal template or end point based on US experience that can be exported to other contexts. Instead, our goal is to help people address the long-term challenges of institutional development and relationship building in the civic and political arenas in ways appropriate to their context. China is a great example.

In the long term democracy does deliver the goods of peace and social justice, but there are many surprises along the way. We must be prepared to stay involved for the long, long haul. And in a world where problems and solutions are increasingly interconnected, these goals must be pursued at the local, national, regional and global levels too. We work on global governance and civil society because people's lives are increasingly affected by international economic institutions and the actions of other States - especially the foreign and security policies of the USA.

So much for the bare bones of the program - what impact have we had? A report we commissioned last year reviewed twenty years of our work and cited ample evidence that grants have strengthened the basic *infrastructure* of citizen participation in democratic governance - the capacities and opportunities people need to secure their rights and fulfill their responsibilities as agents of social change - but that major questions remain about the influence of this infrastructure on the transformation of society, and about the gaps and weaknesses that reduce its broader and deeper impact, a point I'd return to a little later.

Let me cite a few quick examples. First, *innovations in government*, a series of awards programs and associated learning and communications activities dedicated to promoting a more positive role for the State as a force for social justice, launched in the US in 1986 and now active in ten countries including China and Vietnam.

These programs have had some impact but over time they tend to run out of steam as too much attention is paid to the awards and not enough to the processes of reform and innovation that underlie them. So our grants are shifting to support work on re-framing the role of government for public communications and on new methods of strengthening government accountability, without which public and political support will be a pipedream.

Second, citizen participation in the budget process, inspired by the early successes of Porto Alegre in Brazil. This work began in the US in 1993 and now covers 31 out of 50 states that are home to 70% of the US population. And expanded internationally in 1997 through the International Budget Project based in Washington DC and now active in over 70 countries worldwide.

In California, for example, these efforts contributed to debates in the Legislature that culminated in the largest ever allocation in the state budget for affordable housing, while Illinois passed an Earned Income Tax Credit and North Carolina increased sales tax to cover vital social expenditures.

Fundar, a core partner in Mexico, used analysis and advocacy to win a tenfold increase in public funding for a national program to reduce maternal mortality in 2003 and filed more than 200 freedom-of-information requests with government agencies to track and analyze federal spending on HIV/AIDS, using this data to develop an advocacy strategy that resulted in a 20 percent increase in funding in 2006.

This work is increasingly popular with other donors including Gates Foundation (\$18 million to IBP starting this year) and DFID's \$200 million Transparency Fund, a huge increase in funding that of course raises questions of its own but makes it possible for Ford to shift resources into work that hopefully constitutes a new cutting edge so that the cycle can begin again. In our case that means more support for decentralized policy-research and communications capacities that build on, but are not restricted to, the budget process, and that start to break the stranglehold on policy that is often held by large intermediary non-profits based in capital cities.

Third, strengthening civil society, for example *%Collaborations that Count+*, a six-year effort launched in the US in 1998 to cross issue silos and bridge the divide between community organizing, advocacy, communications and policy groups in 11 states in the South, South-West and North-West.

The Idaho Collaborative, for example, brought together three statewide organizations that had traditionally focused on health care and hunger, women's rights and human rights, and civic participation, respectively. They mounted a successful campaign to establish a minimum wage for farm workers, protect Latino neighborhoods through redistricting, and expand access to children's health insurance. While these substantive gains are notable in their own right, they also reflect the emergence of a more united voice that could influence the policy-making process for years to come.

Outside the US, we commissioned research to evaluate the social justice outcomes of experiments in citizen participation in Brazil, Chile, China, India, Indonesia, the Philippines, and Uganda. For example, civil society engagement with *panchayats*, or village councils, in India, where constitutional reforms in 1993 set quotas for women and scheduled castes. Researchers found that the intervention of grantees was pivotal in enabling newly elected women and *%Dalits+* (so-called untouchables) to exercise influence on these councils. Given the incomplete nature of decentralization, and the enduring legacy of patriarchy and caste discrimination, quotas alone were insufficient. One has to provide adequate support to members of previously marginalized groups *after* they gain access to leadership positions.

So this part of our program has to evolve too, placing greater emphasis on building civic capacity at the grassroots and connecting it horizontally before it links vertically up the political system to national and international policy debates. The Pushback Alliance is a good example, a new collaboration of deeply-embedded local organizations like SCOPE in Los Angeles and Southern Echo in Mississippi that are working together to develop a national movement in favor of low income groups and communities of color controlled and directed from the base of civil society, not the elites.

John Gaventa at IDS, who many of you will know and who has worked with us closely over the years to deepen our learning and keep us honest, says that *%It feels like we're at a tipping point.* There are so many examples around the world of experiments with deepening democracy and participatory governance. Something new is in the making, and clearly a number of streams have contributed to that. But Ford is to be commended for piloting things, linking them internationally, and encouraging dissemination through people to people networks. *+I think that's a pretty fair assessment.*

So what are some of the general lessons we've learned, and what challenges do we face going forward? I've selected ten, just to touch on very briefly. Many of these themes resonate closely with the findings of the Carnegie Inquiry into the Future of Civil Society.

1. *Democracy is a journey, not a destination* - a process of contestation that unfolds over time and is rarely if ever completed. Mature democracies continue to exclude, marginalize and diminish certain social and economic groups, and certain aspects of democracy. So our work is never done.

2. *Context really matters.* There is no one-size-fits-all model for democracy, and opportunities and mechanisms for participation must be rooted in local meanings, shaped and struggled for by citizens. It is vital to understand how context and history influence the different pathways and sequences that underpin democratic evolution. Support for authentic politics does not produce predictable results, but it is a much better way of promoting democracy than imposing outside visions and conditions. Standard recipes contribute to the reconfiguration of authoritarian rule but rarely to democratization e.g. the Middle East.

3. *Participation takes many forms,* and democracy means different things to different people in different places. We need to understand the changing balance between representative and participatory democracy and its implications for social justice, and invest in both accordingly. As recent experience in Kenya shows, the ceremony of multiparty elections guarantees little by way of long-term social and political gains.

4. *Everything is connected.* Democracy must be rooted at the local level but not restricted to it. The failure to link that work to national and global processes and institutions is a serious weakness in much current pro-democracy support. Building networks and partnerships among civil society organizations vertically and horizontally is a crucial part of addressing these weaknesses, but not if it by-passes national politics and the challenges of transforming national states. Working local to global and back down again is one of the hardest challenges facing grant-makers, and we are at a very early stage of finding practical ways to meet it.

5. *Work both sides of the equation.* It's not enough to strengthen civil society groups. We must also support government officials who are championing reform from within. So building the demand for, and the supply of, effective, democratic governance, is equally important - they are not substitutes for each-other. We need to find and support the virtuous circles that connect efforts to strengthen governments' ability to protect citizens' rights, with efforts to put more civil society pressure on States to live up to their social obligations.

6. *Strengthen the links between civil society and political life,* at least those that are amenable to, and appropriate for, non-partisan support. These linkages are central to the ability of democratic governance to deliver peace and social justice. Experience shows that it is groups in civil society with strong networks and connections to institutional political actors like parties and parliaments that are most able to engage new institutions for citizen participation, but we lack good theories of change that might guide our grant-making in this crucial area. I think this is a priority for further research.

7. *Bridge the 'silos' in civil society, and build from the bottom-up.* To play their roles effectively in democratic governance, citizens and their associations must work together

within and across the lines of difference. It is vital to strengthen the connections between different communities, interests and positions, and to build links between community organizing, advocacy and policy work, and communications. Civil society coalitions and alliances are best developed from the bottom up, paying particular attention to democracy, diversity and accountability in civil society itself. There is a particular need to bridge what I call the *grand canyon* in the US context . the huge divide that still exists between largely white, middle-class civil society advocates and those who experience disenfranchisement directly in communities of color.

8. Be self-critical and focus on outcomes from the start. We can't assume that greater citizen participation will automatically result in equitable policies and improved material conditions. Participation is a necessary but not sufficient condition for meaningful democracy, so focus more attention on understanding the conditions that bring the two together. The most powerful pro-democracy interventions promote participation and equality in social, political and economic life together, rather than seeing these as separate undertakings.

9. Accountability is a powerful lever but not a 'magic bullet.' Accountability is a potent and proven weapon in the struggle to revitalize democracy, improve government performance, strengthen civil society, curb the abuse of authority, and secure human rights. It acts as a leading wave for democratic reforms by creating new standards, precedents and opportunities for citizen action to become stronger and more confident in its wake, for new political practices and experiments to take shape, and for stronger incentives to emerge against future wrongdoing or the abuse of power. But it is not an answer to political exclusion in and of itself.

10. Sustained funding is critical to success. Meaningful participation doesn't happen overnight. We can't abandon disenfranchised communities just as they take their seat at the table alongside much more powerful interests. But money is not the only important input. As the experience of the International Budget Project and LOGO-Link shows (a parallel effort to promote global sharing around citizen participation in democratic governance), mutual learning can be a powerful way of strengthening democratic practice. Support for South-South and South-North learning is especially important.

That last observation brings me to our work on social justice philanthropy, which Lenka wanted me to touch on, by which I mean philanthropy that addresses the root causes of poverty, exclusion and disenfranchisement. It's worth remembering that this was an unacceptable term at Ford when I and Chris Harris joined in 1999, since all philanthropy was considered worthwhile by definition. It's to Chris's credit that social justice philanthropy is increasingly accepted as a valid frame for grant-making inside and outside of Ford, even though it is still in a minority in terms of resources, at least in the US (between ten and twenty per cent depending on how you define social justice grant-making). This may be under threat from some current trends around philanthrocapitalism (tonite's event).

Why is this work important? Obviously, to get more resources to those who are doing the most difficult work at the sharp end of violence and injustice. But also, to reduce the dependence of civil society on foreign funding in lower-income countries and so strengthen their legitimacy as social actors, and to help to transform philanthropy itself so that it begins to fulfill its potential . to help it to be bolder and braver, more focused

and less fashion-conscious, more transparent and accountable, and less distant and bureaucratic. What does our work consist of?

- First, benchmark studies to create a baseline against which to publicize the reality of foundation spending and measure progress over time.
- Second, creating a literature, and a set of conversations and global networks, that can legitimize social justice philanthropy as a new paradigm for action.
- Third, increasing the number of social justice funders, both existing and new foundations, so that the pool of resources available is constantly expanding.
- And fourth, supporting new philanthropic entities in developing countries that start off with a social justice focus.

That was the origin of the International Initiative to Strengthen Philanthropy or IISP that some of you may have heard about, a \$100-million investment in groups like the Dalit Fund in India, the Arab Human Rights Fund in Beirut (launched this month), and TrustAfrica in Senegal. One criticism I would make of other donors would be their reluctance to get involved in this kind of foundation-building effort, despite the rhetoric about sustainability and the need to reduce civil society's dependence on foreign aid. There isn't much evidence that this rhetoric matches the reality of even enlightened donors like DFID here in the UK, still less the European Union.

To sum up, grants from the Ford Foundation and others of course have played a useful role in strengthening the infrastructure of citizen participation in democratic governance. In contexts as diverse as Kampala, Beijing and Mississippi, this support has enabled citizens to build their own capacity and forge vital connections as well as to seize opportunities to secure their rights and fulfill their responsibilities as agents of social change. No less significantly, the Foundation has stimulated new discourses and conversations among funders and practitioners, legitimized new actors and approaches, and fostered a more nuanced view of civil society, a more critical view of philanthropy, and a more positive view of government.

What remains to be done (including in the United States) is to translate these gains into concrete social and economic outcomes so that democracy is seen to deliver the goods, beyond protecting people's right to vote and organize collective action. We call this the challenge of deepening democracy and it is likely to frame our work over the next few years.

The future of democracy, or more specifically what kind of democracy prevails, is at stake in countries as varied as Kenya, Pakistan, Russia, and the United States. At the heart of this challenge lies a striking paradox: as democracy expands all over the globe, writes Yogendra Yadav in a paper we commissioned last year, our notion of what it means to be democratic may have actually shrunk, to little more than the legitimization of a managerial elite presiding over the economy, foreclosing real possibilities for political transformation. This is a call to all of us to democratize the conversation about democracy and expand our democratic imaginations. And that constitutes a pretty big challenge for all of us in the foundation and grant-making worlds.

To me that means three things that I'd leave you with that in the hope that they provoke some initial questions for our conversation:

- Bringing social and economic democracy back into the conversation. Democracy requires both freedom and equality, yet (perhaps as a result of US dominance in this debate), freedom gets the lion's share of the attention.
- Thinking in terms of participatory and deliberative democracy and not just representation . that's where some of the most interesting innovations lie, like participatory budgeting and citizens forums.
- And being open to learning from non-Western experience where many of these innovations are strongest, like Brazil and India (e.g, importing participation in the local budget process by Labor government into the UK last year).

These changes would lay the basis for a different kind of conversation that sees democracy as something we co-create together, learning as we go, not something that is exported from one part of the world to another against a standard template or end point in time. And that I think would be a conversation with a lot more intellectual excitement, practical influence, ethical integrity and real purchase on the ground to which all of us as grant-makers could make a central contribution.

Michael Edwards is the director of the Governance and Civil Society Program at the Ford Foundation in New York.

From 1998 to 1999, he was the Senior Civil Society Specialist at the World Bank in Washington D.C., where he led a programme designed to improve the agency's understanding of, and engagement with, a wide range of civic groups.

Prior to his work at the World Bank, Mr. Edwards spent 15 years as a manager in international relief and development NGOs, including periods with Oxfam-UK (as regional director for Southern Africa), and Save the Children-UK (as director of research, evaluation and advocacy).

His many books and articles have helped to shape our thinking about NGOs, civil society and international cooperation. His book "Future Positive" was nominated for the Chadwick Alger Prize for the best book on international affairs and the Grawemeyer Award for Ideas Promoting World Order. He holds a Ph.D from the University of London in Geography.

The views in this speech do not necessarily reflect the views of any organisations with which Michael is affiliated.