Notes to self – Empowered partners and voices

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I know that in theory everybody is a stakeholder in governance work, and that the collective noun for stakeholders is "a forum". I also know that stakeholders have incentives and disincentives, and that that they engage in collective action, or face collective action problems. I know that stakeholders also have "agency" and should have "voice". I remember from university that there are important strands of thinking on the role of stakeholders that emerged from community development work. Based on my own reading it looks as though the various stakeholders fall broadly into the following groups:

1. Partners – partners seem to be the institutions we work with (and are usually trying to assist). They are often government ministries or agencies, and our relationship with them should be based on their "ownership", itself an important part of the Paris Principles for Aid Effectiveness. Ownership contrasts with "conditionality" and relies on mutual agreements based around the priorities that our partners set. I know from my studies that there is also a powerful critique of 'ownership'. It is possible to argue that a strategy is written primarily to secure donor funds, and as a result is either a wish list or a guess at what others might pay for. I remember that the Guardian Newspaper ran a funny piece on "development jargon decoded: local ownership", suggesting that the debate happens at every level. There is also an argument that ownership or conditionality are not really the issues, but instead we should work to understand the blockages that exist within our partner bodies. The World Bank developed "problem chain analysis", to help and it is argued that we should think more "behaviourally" to understand the problems. The 2015 World Development Report by the World Bank even suggests that the ideas of behavioural economics and "nudge theory," have a role in our thinking on governance.

2. Users (or clients) – those who actually use government services, whatever they might be, and for development purposes are usually talked about as communities, or the poor. In the old days it was possible to talk about "demand side" issues and social pressure for reform, now the emphasis is on empowerment and accountability. I have read some of John Gaventa's work, including reviews of accountability programmes, and these suggest that action to promote the voice of users is complex

and requires multiple approaches and methods. I know that the World Bank has experimented with specific tools such as citizen report cards, and that Jeff Thindwa from the Bank has argued that the customer can be king if specific tools, such as open budgeting, are used to ensure sufficient two-way communication. There have been lots of experiments and trials of client feedback mechanisms, and there is something called the Transparency and Accountability Initiative based in London. I also remember hearing of a programme called "Making All Voices Count" that uses innovative approaches (such as mobile technology) to promote accountability. Mobile technology is seen as a major step forward in creating practical mechanisms for people to raise concerns – and find information.

3. Formal representatives – those representatives chosen by people to articulate their grievances and hold others to account. In most of the countries where I will work this is parliamentarians/legislators and local government representatives. Elected representatives have democratic legitimacy, but the literature I have read warns that many lack resources and information, and work in structures where the mechanisms of accountability might be weak. I know that some budget and account committees in parliaments have very little pull when it comes to their auditor counterparts. Formal representatives may also not be very representative of wider society, and it is also important to assess risks of corruption. Equally there are many expert groups that have engaged in parliamentary strengthening programmes and have published evaluations and lessons learned as a result (the World Bank, UNDP, USAID, DFID etc). My boss sent me a quote from an old USAID handbook: "legislative strengthening programming is an art, not a science. Carrying out assessments and understanding the proper roles of legislatures and their constituent parts (parties, members, staff), the factors that affect legislative performance, and the purposes of specific programming activities will not inexorably lead to certain results." Should I be reassured or worried?

4. Multiplier and accelerator groups – it seems as though the middle-people in the accountability/voice relationship are groups that can amplify the voice of users, and also ensure a good flow of information, particularly the media and civil society. I know that the dual nature of these roles are important – both groups often prefer to be seen as involved in two-way communication rather than dispensing educational messages. I also read Sina Odugbemi and Pippa Norris's report on the media and governance reform that suggested that the media can play an important scrutiny (naming and shaming) role. It is clear to me that the media and civil society can be controversial, they can be politicised, divisive and not immune to corruption and abuse. I saw that the OECD had published "12 lessons" on partnering with civil society that said "Donors should continuously test their assumptions about the work of CSOs in developing countries, especially when defining the purpose of the partnership with CSOs. This will help ensure that policies and priorities reflect reality." But shouldn't development workers be doing that more generally, and all the time?

5. Funders and taxpayers – taxpayers in donor countries are not usually so directly involved, although they may seek information and ask direct questions. But the role of taxpayers is always a consideration because we have to consider "reputational risk". There is an issue of "taxpayer morale": whether people believe that they are receiving value for money for their payments, and this has often been seen as a problem for aid. Surveys in many countries show that taxpayer support for aid can sometimes be vulnerable, I think that YouGov did a Eurotrack survey in 2013 that showed scepticism on levels of aid. The need to show value for money to tax payers is the reason why I must demonstrate results and think about indicators, and also why I have done a module on corruption.

Engaging with stakeholders on development is presumably a never-ending process, but I would also assume that I will meet far more partners than clients? If I am sitting in an office in the capital most of the time how will I really get to hear local voices, and how often will I meet representatives, do we meet parliamentarians at all? And how will I test my assumptions about CSOs and the media – I am not even sure what my assumptions are! And if our partners want us to take risks, but reputational risk is a constraint, how does promoting their ownership work? I really don't see how all this fits together at all.

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