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Partnership and its problems:

The Institute for Democracy in South Africa,
democratisation strategy,
and foreign donor aid

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Introduction

How can democracy in South Africa best be promoted? And is foreign political aid assisting or weakening its promotion?

This paper seeks to contribute to an answer to these questions by examining the work of South Africa's best-known democracy promotion organisation, the Institute for Democracy in South Africa (IDASA), and the role of foreign political aid in its activities. It seeks to understand IDASA's strategy for democratisation, the notion of democracy that this implies, and the degree to which it corresponds to South Africa realities. It also discusses donor approaches to IDASA and the understanding of democracy and democratisation strategy these imply in the hope that this will help generate more effective strategies for building democracy among both donors and those they support.

The choice of IDASA is crucial to the theme of this project, for three reasons. First, an assessment of civil society's role in democratisation must acknowledge that not all civil society organisations (CSOs) are membership-based, deriving their influence from their ability to represent the interests of large numbers of people - some seek to make an impact through their skill at advocating particular goals for society: IDASA is one such organisation. It is not membership-based but is committed to a range of activities which aim to strengthen democracy. Second, IDASA's concern with democratic strengthening is central to the theme of the project and made it the obvious advocacy NGO for our study. Thirdly, IDASA's ability to attract foreign donor funding is much higher than most other NGOs, and it is clearly accepted by donors as South Africa's premier democracy promotion organisation. An examination of IDASA's strategy and activities, therefore, seemed the best indicator of the kind of approach towards democratisation favoured by these donors.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, South African non-governmental and community-based organisations (NGOs and CBOs) that were seen to be resisting apartheid were almost guaranteed assistance from foreign donors since, according to IDASA's executive director, Paul Graham, 'funding South African NGOs was part of many foreign governments' national budgets'.¹ Funding was meant to achieve a clearly stated political objective: the end of apartheid. As Khehla Shubane notes: '... political factors intervened to influence the rationale and coherence of strategy, making donors' priorities and methods of operation far more open to influence than some current analyses suggest, and producing a form of donor support which was highly unusual.'² One of these 'unusual' features was a willingness to fund organisations on the strength of their commitment to fighting apartheid. IDASA, which played a significant role during this period in preparing the way for a negotiated settlement between the white minority and the African National Congress (ANC), was a key beneficiary.

¹ Interview, Paul Graham, executive director of IDASA, Pretoria, 2000.

² Khehla Shubane, *Local content: the politics of European and American donor intervention in SA under apartheid*, Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies, 1999, p 5.

After 1994, strengthening the new democracy became the preoccupation of both IDASA and donors. This goal could be sought through two strategic paths: while they do not exclude each other, it is common for one to be emphasised at the expense of the other. The first is to act as a vehicle through which citizens can hold government to account, the second to work with the government in strengthening democratic institutions. At first glance, IDASA may be seen to have adopted, with the support of donors, the second strategy, becoming a service provider to the government at the expense of a critical 'watchdog' role, helping to reduce democracy to an administrative tool of economic management rather than a vehicle for participation. The evidence suggests, however, that IDASA seeks both to monitor the government and to work with it. A key theme of this paper will be an examination of the IDASA-government relationship and its implications for democratisation and donor decision-making.

The paper draws its primary data from interviews with IDASA's executive director, programme managers and project co-ordinators, as well as donor organisations, especially the 26 which fund IDASA. Interviews were conducted with recipients of IDASA services in an effort to assess two of its projects, the training of local councillors and the children's budget. The projects are the responsibility of its local government programme and budget information service respectively. Information was also collected from secondary materials - IDASA annual reports are the core - which helped track the changes in donor funding to NGOs and the transformation IDASA has undergone since its founding to keep pace with the donor environment and political change.

IDASA's history: from midwives of negotiation to ...

According to Graham, IDASA is always in transition in parallel to broader political change in South Africa.³ It is a non-profit company registered under section 21 of the Companies Act and was founded in 1986 by Alex Boraine and Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, former members of parliament who had concluded that extra-parliamentary action was needed to end apartheid.

At its inception, it committed itself to 'promote a non-racial democratic South Africa'. Its stated goal was 'to mobilise white opinion to understand and accept the current dynamics in South African politics and the realities of the society, and thereafter work towards a nonracial nation in which all will be free to exercise their democratic rights and enjoy the benefits and protection of full citizenship'.⁴ This implied a belief that whites could be persuaded, rather than forced, to relinquish power, a view which, IDASA soon noted, prompted 'bitter attacks from the apartheid government and right-wing whites and strong suspicion from the black left'.⁵ As Boraine later noted, its key goal was to foster negotiation between the white establishment and black resistance: 'the major emphasis in

³ Interview, Graham.

⁴ IDASA, memorandum.

⁵ IDASA, Annual report 1989, p 2.

all that we set out to do, was on negotiation politics ... in contrast to the politics of exclusion, of repression and resistance'.⁶

As the chairperson of its board, Dr Beyers Naudé, stressed, IDASA's commitment to democracy was a challenge to white South Africa:

In ... choosing the name Institute for Democratic Alternative for South Africa [IDASA] took a deliberate risk to enter the arena of a, for South Africa, controversial concept: a democratic alternative to an existing suppressive and autocratic rule. This choice implies that the present rule was in fact no real democracy and that only an alternative which is truly democratic would be accepted by the people ...⁷

But it was not the most militant anti-apartheid option available: the United Democratic Front (UDF) and Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) were leading mass domestic resistance to apartheid. While, in the view of one analysis, IDASA was a significant expression of white extra-parliamentary resistance, demonstrating the fracturing of white unity,⁸ it was clearly sensitive to the charge that it was a vehicle for compromise rather than confrontation with the white minority: thus its 1989 annual report saw its strength in an ability to position itself relative to political forces and groups.⁹

IDASA largely succeeded, however, in maintaining credibility among anti-apartheid forces. It was a more critical voice than the parliamentary opposition, seeking to force the government to adhere to 'the basics of democracy — human values and dignity'.¹⁰ And, in the late 1980s, a stalemate between the state and resistance set in: the latter came to see negotiation as a source of strength. IDASA's work at that point – organising meetings, conferences (national and international) and secret negotiations – was increasingly consistent with resistance strategy.

Perhaps its most celebrated activity was the conference it organised in 1987 in Dakar, Senegal: 61 people, mainly white Afrikaners, travelled to meet the banned ANC, branded by establishment opinion as a 'terrorist' movement.¹¹ This initiative was consistent with IDASA's claim to

⁶ Alex Boraine, A democratic alternative: a brief history of IDASA, in Ian Liebenberg et al (eds), *The long march - the story of the struggle of liberation in South Africa*, Pretoria: Human Sciences Research Council 1994, pp 205-12.

⁷ Boraine, A democratic alternative.

⁸ Nancy Widmann, *Aspects of the history of IDASA from 1986-1996: from rooting democracy via facilitation and negotiation to advocating democracy and multilateralism*, thesis for an honours degree in history, University of Cape Town, 1997, p 10.

⁹ IDASA, Annual report, 1989.

¹⁰ Interview, Graham.

¹¹ The conference was organised around four principal topics: strategies for bringing about fundamental change in South Africa; building national unity; perspectives on the structures of government of a free South Africa; and the economy of a liberated South Africa. See Boraine, A democratic alternative.t.

... [stem] from a need for contact and communication between those people of goodwill who have been kept apart for so long that they have lost touch with each others' humanity. It seeks to counter the distrust that exists throughout South Africa and to persuade Whites not to cling to apartheid because of fear of an alternative.¹²

The Dakar conference was funded by Danielle Mitterrand of France-Liberté Foundation and the Friedrich Naumann Stiftung (FNS), and was made possible by Senegalese president Abdou Diouf's agreement to allow the meeting to take place publicly in his country.¹³ Besides softening hostility to the ANC and thus laying a foundation for negotiation, the conference helped to promote IDASA's reputation internationally and so increased its sources of funding. It followed in 1989 by organising, with the FNS, another meeting between whites and ANC representatives.

IDASA's strategy of seeking 'the creation of a negotiation climate which will lead to a new democratic, non-racial, South Africa' was the result of its own strategic choices: 'in 1988 all IDASA staff met ... to discuss the projects and events it believed it ought to consider sponsoring or tackling during 1989'.¹⁴ It seems, then, that donors did not have much say in how their money was used.

IDASA is convinced that its activities in the late 1980s had a discernible impact. While, by 1989, expectations of Nelson Mandela's release and of a negotiated settlement were high, Graham believed IDASA was able to create 'bonding or bridging social capital', by which he means that it brought people of differing backgrounds and orientations together to reflect on South Africa's future and so to bridge some of the divides between them.¹⁵ More specifically, it offered a vehicle for middle-class whites who rejected apartheid but did not want to be part of the liberation movement; for the first time, they began to visit the black townships: the divisions were crumbling. It continued to keep negotiation in the public mind by organising conferences within South Africa¹⁶ and abroad, the latter to accommodate the still exiled resistance leadership.

When negotiations began in early 1990, IDASA continued its commitment to them, facilitating them and engaging with the white right wing in an attempt to bring it to the negotiating table. With negotiations under way, and given its conviction that the road to democracy was irreversible, IDASA began to change its programme, staff, and structure to adapt to South Africa's future needs. But there was also much continuity: its conferences and workshops continued in 1999, and the focus was still on obstacles to a negotiated future: in 1990 it focused on the media, the military, and especially on countering growing white fear of the future. It sought to play 'an interpretative and facilitative role against

¹² IDASA, Information sheet, Cape Town, 1987

¹³ Widmann, Aspects of the history of IDASA.

¹⁴ Alex Borraine, executive director's report, in *idasa, Annual report, 1989*, p 3.

¹⁵ Interview, Graham.

¹⁶ These national conferences included 'Options for the future', a culmination of several regional conferences focusing on the 1988 ANC constitutional guidelines, and 'Peace and security', which attracted considerable attention.

the background of contending aspirations and fears'¹⁷ – its commitment to negotiation and reconciliation at the grass roots grew considerably. By 1991, however, its focus shifted to economic justice, education, human rights, media, and grass-roots involvement: it also created the Training Centre for Democracy (TCD) in Johannesburg to train other CSOs to develop and practice democracy. Its aim was to ensure that democracy was to be established not by leaders alone but with active citizens' participation.

In 1993 the protagonists agreed that minority rule would be replaced by a government elected by universal franchise on 27 April 1994. IDASA's focus was dominated by the election¹⁸ which was the culmination of the negotiations for which it had worked – this meant additional funding and staff. Training domestic observers, party election agents and voter educators were key activities. But voter education, with other democracy promotion organisations such as the Institute for Multiparty Democracy (IMPD), was a priority for IDASA which saw this as part of strengthening the institutional capacity required to sustain a vibrant democracy. Later in 1994 it insisted that the election had demonstrated the need for education which imparted the skills, knowledge, and attitudes required by citizens for full participation in society.¹⁹ Even during this heady period, however, the earlier focus on negotiation continued – it also played a major facilitating role in the emergence of economic development forums in three regions.

In 1994 the democratic changes IDASA championed were achieved: Boraine left and was replaced by Wilmot James, a University of Cape Town sociologist who was charged with leading IDASA into the new democratic environment. The change which was initiated by then president F W de Klerk's speech of February 1990 created a need for IDASA to begin reinventing itself to deal with both its new challenge of making democracy work and the donor threat of financial withdrawal to CSOs.

The challenge for IDASA was on the one hand to re-evaluate its strategies and structures in the light of significant changes and, at the same time, not to allow this process to paralyse its continuing commitment.²⁰

It was eager to stress its support for the new order, warning that 'there were still dangers that it could be reversed by ... right-wing subversion, persisting conservative agendas and ... counter-revolutionary sedition'.²¹ It also faced a challenge from the donor perception that CSOs had no major role in the new democracy and that attention should shift to assisting the government²² – a threat to the survival of many NGOs, including IDASA. With the end of apartheid, donors started to review their aid programmes to South Africa. The main change in approach after 1994 was that most assistance was channelled through

¹⁷ IDASA, *Democracy in Action*, February 1990, p 9.

¹⁸ Graham, cited in IDASA, Annual report 1994, p 8.

¹⁹ IDASA, Annual report 1994, p 8.

²⁰ IDASA, Annual report 1990. The commitment was presumably the traditional concern to boost negotiation.

²¹ Wilmot James, executive report, in IDASA, Annual report 1998, p 3.

²² Wilmot James, Interview, Cape Town, 2000.

the new government which was deemed to need support if the new political dispensation were to survive. While before 1994 foreign aid was given to NGOs and not government, the opposite began to happen after it. CSOs were increasingly seen as ‘agents of delivery’.²³ With the desire to defend the new order, this came together in a concern for ‘democracy consolidation, in which the organisation has a clear stake, something donor funding has been very clear on’.²⁴

IDASA needed to ensure that it contributed to strengthening the young democracy in a way that also attracted increasingly scarce donor funding. But the stress fell on holding government to account. James said IDASA ‘would develop a policing review role, focusing on monitoring policy and assessing how government is working’.²⁵ As a public interest NGO, its first goal was ‘to monitor government, keep it to account, and alert the public to emerging problems’.²⁶ But James insists that, even then, IDASA’s understanding of democracy recognised the need to strengthen government capacity as well as to monitor it, to increase its service delivery capability even while watching over it to ensure that it did not deviate from its constitutional responsibility. He says he moved ‘deliberately ... from promoting democracy to making [it] work better’.²⁷ The institution that was meant to drive this vision was the Public Information Centre (PIC) whose mission is ‘to collect, analyse and provide information on public policy to enhance transparency, accountability and effectiveness in government’.²⁸ In 1995 IDASA’s programmes fell in three areas: governance, security, and public education.²⁹ Much governance effort was devoted to preparing for the local elections. The local government information centre (LOGIC) was established to provide citizens access to information on elections.³⁰

IDASA’s current activity occurs in two democracy centres, each with its own council. Cape Town’s houses five programmes: the budget information service (BIS); the political information and monitoring service (PIMS); Democracy Radio; the transformation and equity programme (TEP), the Southern African migration project (SAMP); and the public opinion service (POS). Pretoria’s houses three: curriculum development and citizenship education (CDCE); the community safety unit (CSU); and LOGIC. There is also a KwaZulu Natal democracy project.

In sum, IDASA has shown a significant capacity to reinvent itself in response to changes in the political opportunity structure – to alterations in its environment which created new openings while foreclosing others. This is clearly an essential requirement

²³ Civil society discussion group, Centre for Policy Studies, 2000

²⁴ Wilmot James, cited in *Democracy in Action*, IDASA, November 1998.

²⁵ *Mail & Guardian*, 30 September 1994.

²⁶ IDASA, Annual report 1995.

²⁷ Interview, James.

²⁸ IDASA, Annual report 1995.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p 7. Community policing is a key aspect of the security programme; public education and information functions are carried out via the work of the public information centre as well as IDASA publications.

³⁰ IDASA, Annual report 1995.

for a democracy promotion organisation during a fast-moving and fluid transition, but is not one which is always met – South Africa's passage to democracy is littered with examples of NGOs, including some with substantial resources, that failed to adapt to the new conditions. Whether by accident or design, this ability to adjust to changed realities attracted a continued stream of donor funding.

Funding IDASA

At its inception in 1987, IDASA was funded by a wide spectrum of donors from Scandinavian countries that supported the liberation movements³¹ via Mme Mitterand and the Rowntree Charitable Trust to the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), an American federal agency, and the FNS (the foundation attached to the German Liberal Democratic Party) which provided funding which supported the running of its office.

It is believed that funding for civil society in general reached its peak between 1990 and 1994 in an effort to strengthen political parties in the negotiation process. IDASA's annual budget reached R6 million for 1992. Donors that committed more than R200 000 to its work include the FNS; Friends of IDASA (South Africa), comprising businesses and individuals; the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), an American federal agency; Danchurchaid (Denmark); the Swedish Liberal Party; the Church of Norway; and the Swiss Embassy.³² In this period IDASA received large amounts to fund preparations for the elections and civic education.

After the 1994 elections, the threat from donors to withdraw aid to NGOs increased. In 1996 the shift became effective, with the larger proportion of aid switched to government in recognition of the reality that it was the principal development engine. This occurred within the ambit of the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), which provided a policy framework for donors to focus their commitment (and is also seen by some analyses as a catalyst for reorienting anti-apartheid CSOs towards co-operation with the government). Funding constraints led IDASA to take steps to ensure its financial sustainability and independence – in 1995 it changed its mission statement to focus entirely on institution-building. This was prompted by the perception that the biggest challenge for the new government was building capacity. It also indicated IDASA's strategy of changing focus in response to political change.

IDASA also cut costs by rationalising, turning seven regional offices into the two democracy centres. This transformation was funded by Swiss Development Co-operation (SDC). The two offices had to respond to the task of 'insuring a strong civil society with a commitment to a critical review of policy and to building partnerships for development, and an empowered citizenry with a commitment to civil and economic justice.'³³ In 1996 a major grant from the Norwegian Agency for Development (NORAD) made it possible for IDASA to buy the two buildings in Pretoria and Cape Town. IDASA believes these

³¹ *Development Co-operation Report II for South Africa 1994--9*, final report, August 2000

³² IDASA, Annual report 1991.

³³ IDASA, Annual report 1997.

steps helped to create the necessary organisational and financial platform to enable it to acquire the capacity to influence national trends. By implication, influence depends on resources as well as strategy.

In 1995 IDASA also submitted a proposal to the Ford Foundation for a democracy endowment fund, which was supposed to ensure that it retains the necessary independence and capacity to pursue its mission of ensuring the success of the democratic transition in South Africa. It was seeking to prepare for the next transitional phase: the second round of elections, which was expected to irrevocably push donors away from NGOs. The endowment was targeted to reach R25 million by 1997. In 1995 IDASA received R100 000 from the Dutch government for a pre-endowment audit. The endowment was to be funded from a wide range of sources including, an expected R10 million from foundations based in the United States, R4,5 million from Ford, and R5,2 million from NORAD. Other anticipated partners were the Rowntree Trust, the Canadian and Swedish International Development Agencies (CIDA and SIDA), the Carnegie Corporation, and the Kellogg Foundation.³⁴ Ford and NORAD honoured their pledges and their grants have been invested. The board decided that the capital would not be spent but ‘will exist in perpetuity’.³⁵ But it was decided that interest from the endowment would be used to fund ‘good-ideas’ projects as well as those that cannot easily get support from donors.³⁶

While searching for its new structure and mission during 1994 and 1995, IDASA initiated projects that dealt with white fear of the economy under a black government, and migration in southern Africa.³⁷ These proposals helped it to show its relevance to post-apartheid society. Despite the decrease in funding from the donors after the first elections, IDASA, because of its new mission, managed to bring in new donors such as USAID, CIDA, Ford, and the SDC.

Despite the many initiatives to attract funds, IDASA’s funding for core activities has diminished. In early 1994 donors started insisting on specific proposals outlining budgets, time frames, project activities and outcomes. Today, IDASA does not have money to do what it would like to do – it has been forced to abandon the appointment of political officers who played a key role in educating citizens on democratic principles, their rights and obligation to the state. Although it remains active, its activities are constrained by current donor preferences.

Donor aid: rationale and impact

Donor aid accounts for 90 per cent of IDASA’s budget; the remaining 10 per cent is mobilised domestically from government and business. Without donor money IDASA would

³⁴ IDASA, *The democracy endowment fund: a proposal to the Ford Foundation*, 12 August 1995

³⁵ IDASA, Annual report 1996, p 28.

³⁶ IDASA, Annual report 1997.

³⁷ Interview, Graham.

not last for three months.³⁸ Why does it attract substantial donor funding, and what effect, if any, does this have on its work?

IDASA's credibility

IDASA's credibility with donors seems to be based first on a widespread perception that it produces quality work. Ford believes IDASA has established itself and has the expertise to do what it has set out to do. This credibility is, in a sense, self-reinforcing, as one successful partnership leads to another - most donors have been working with IDASA for years, and most believe its products always correspond with the terms of reference set between the two partners. The FNS also attributes its confidence in IDASA to the trust built in years of working together. To strengthen and preserve the position it has vis-à-vis donors, IDASA has been forced to work hard on its profile. According to Graham, it has managed to achieve this through its analytical work.

He says IDASA 'negotiates' its legitimacy day by day - when it wins government tenders or trains town clerks, councillors, parliamentarians, or other NGOs - by demonstrating its capacity: it is still considered an important partner in the consolidation of democracy by the public and government. This suggests that an organisation that does not have a constituency can play an important role in directly or indirectly building a culture of responsiveness and accountability.

A second important factor is its ability to meet the administrative requirements of donors. Both donors and IDASA itself stress that the former have confidence in it because it is financially accountable and reports efficiently on work done in the required format. IDASA's track record with all its donors is 'excellent'.³⁹ All the donors interviewed said they received accurate financial reports and well-written reports at the end of every project according to the terms of reference in the project proposal - this matches the requirements of USAID, CIDA, SIDA, the Danish Development Agency (DANIDA), the SDC, the FNS, and others.⁴⁰

A potential obstacle to credibility is IDASA's origins in 'white' politics and the fact that many of its most prominent officers are white. The role of South African civil society is weakened by racial division: most NGOs that seek to watch over the government are white-dominated, since black organisations still seem reluctant to challenge the government they voted into power. But IDASA believes it has nothing to hide, since its internal organisation has kept pace with South Africa's transformation process. Every year, it publishes the profile of its team and board, consisting of people who are accountable to other democratic movements and are assumed not to associate themselves with organisations that are not vehicles for emancipation. Graham adds that IDASA believes in the capacity of each of its employees, and not in the race of a person.⁴¹ While IDASA does not

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Interview, Alice Brown, Ford Foundation.

⁴⁰ IDASA, Democracy endowment fund report, p 11.

⁴¹ Interview, Graham.

see this problem as a constraint to its credibility, one of its donors does insist that its board is not sufficiently representative.⁴²

Thus far, reasons cited for donor support imply that compliance with administrative requirements is more important to donors than efficacy. To test this, we must examine the degree to which donors have strategic understandings of what is required to build democracy, and the extent to which this influences IDASA priorities.

Means and ends – donor requirements, and IDASA's response

It was noted earlier that, before 1994, almost the only criterion for aid from most donors was opposition to apartheid – foreign funding was anti-state, and couched in an anti-apartheid rubric.⁴³ Now the trend is towards funding specific programmes or projects rather than the core activities of recipient organisations. This gives donors greater potential influence over the activities of the organisations they support.

What, then, are the goals of funders, and what understandings of the route to democracy do these imply? All support liberal democracy's basics: respect for human rights, freedom of expression, protection of minorities, and multipartyism. But the details of strategy are often crucial, and here an answer is rendered more difficult by the insistence of donors, particularly official ones, that they are supporting South Africa's vision of democracy and development rather than imposing theirs. Knud Johansen, minister councillor at the Royal Danish Embassy, put it in these terms:

We fund when the need of South Africa coincides with our ability and plan negotiated with government. For example we cannot intervene in the mining or infrastructure sector because we do not have the capacity... we cannot sponsor what is not on our agenda. It is for this reason that our agenda for co-operation is set in advance with the government.

Similarly, official and non-governmental donors insist that programmes that are considered for funding must correspond to a democratic South Africa's development priorities.⁴⁴ Negotiations between the South African government and official donors thus focus on synchronising grants and loans with annual budget estimates, and the adaptation of technical assistance and technology transfers to South African needs.⁴⁵ Bilateral agreements usually determine the programme to be funded. While Britain, for example, claims that the agreed programme is the product of 'extensive consultation with stakeholders from ... business and all sector of civil society, both in South Africa and Britain'⁴⁶ as well as the government (and most donors claim to have consulted 'civil society' on their

⁴² Interview, Christa Kuljian, director, South Africa Office, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, April 2001.

⁴³ Interview, Graham.

⁴⁴ Interviews with SDC, DANIDA, CIDA, Ford Foundation, 2000.

⁴⁵ Michael Bratton and Chris Landsberg, *Aiding reconstruction in South Africa: promise and delivery*, paper prepared for workshop on pledges of aid co-sponsored by the Social Science Research Council and the Center for International Co-operation, New York, 8–9 May, 1998.

⁴⁶ Department for International Development, *Supporting education in South Africa*, Pretoria, 2000.

programmes), in most cases they are the outcome of direct bilateral negotiation between the two governments.

Donors are clearly concerned not to be seen to be dictating to the South African government. But official donor agencies are meant to promote democracy in recipient countries - and donors such as the FNS are German party foundations that receive taxpayers' funds on the explicit understanding that they will promote a particular political philosophy: thus the liberal FNS also funds, for example, the Democratic Party youth commission. And a decision merely to endorse the priorities of the South African government would in itself indicate a strategic choice, one that recognised the South African state as an authentic representative of the national interest: one key donor, therefore, insists that South Africa democracy is 'well instituted' (although acknowledging that levels of participation may be inadequate).⁴⁷ This would contrast with analyses stressing the limits of the new representative system, and implying the need to strengthen public participation before the government can be said to reflect accurately the desires of citizens. One seasoned observer of donor patterns, however, suggests that this choice has less to do with a considered assessment of South Africa than a tendency to base funding strategies on previous experiences of funding transitional democracies, all of which are assumed to have the same needs, primarily the training and capacity-building of formal government institutions.⁴⁸ This analysis seems to be supported by the increased stress of official donors on building government capacity - and on the fact that, in some cases, such as the Danish programme, the application to South Africa of the transitional democracy criterion was explicit. While the programme stresses 'the strengthening of democracy through increased awareness of, and respect for, human rights and good governance both on the part of the public authorities and civil society', all its projects are partnerships with the government.⁴⁹

But it is perhaps an oversimplification to assume that official donors simply implement South African government priorities: a recent study of six major donors in South Africa finds that only Australia and the Netherlands shape their programmes to respond to the needs of the government.⁵⁰ And, since both South Africa's constitution and the stated values of the government are consistent with the promotion of advocacy, there is more than enough room for donors to insist that funding independent CSOs is a form of support for the new society. Thus, while the British Department for International Development (DFID) and the Ford Foundation fund 'the promotion of community safety as a prerequisite for sustainable democracy',⁵¹ a programme that does not in itself imply support for democratisation, others offer aid which could open space for citizen initiative. DANIDA funds IDASA work on democracy, human rights, and local government. The SDC

⁴⁷ Interview, Bridget Dillon, social development adviser, DFID, Pretoria.

⁴⁸ Interview, Gerald Kraak, donor consultant.

⁴⁹ Danish transitional assistance programme to South Africa, www.denmark.co.za.

⁵⁰ Glenda White et al, *Evaluation of ODA to democracy and good governance*, International Organisation Development, Johannesburg, 2000.

⁵¹ IDASA, Annual report 1998, p 10.

stresses building ‘institutional capacities’ but also the ‘empowerment of underprivileged groups’; its areas of support include governance, democratisation and human rights, education, land reform, and community development.⁵² But donor priorities are often expressed in generalities - sustainability, avoidance of dependence, and gender equality⁵³ - which make it difficult to determine strategic priorities.

And, while donors are expected by those whose money they disburse to spend it in pursuit of specific goals and values, both their capacity and will to impose a coherent agenda on recipients may be overstated. IDASA, for example, has two strategies to ensure that it can, to a degree, shape its own agenda. It tries to diversify the source of its funding – on each project it tries to bring on board as many donors as possible so that none can claim ownership – and has created an undesignated fund that enables it to pursue its own priorities. And Graham insists that the constitution is sufficiently advanced in its support for social justice and democratic values to ensure that a wide range of strategies can be pursued while remaining faithful to it.⁵⁴ Nor can it simply be assumed that IDASA – and other recipients – have no role in shaping the agenda; IDASA’s shifts in strategy may have broadly responded to donor concerns, but it had considerable leeway in shaping the nature of that response. It may be more appropriate to see the relationship as a two-way one in which recipients influence donors but are in turn influenced by them.

That provides a useful context in which to view the considerable evidence that IDASA has been moving in a similar direction to many donors – towards greater co-operation with the government. The fact that both are moving in the same direction does not mean that IDASA is simply following donor prescriptions – but it is a trend worth examining in itself.

IDASA and the government

The government that assumed office in 1994 took on the delivery of services to the entire population, including those denied them in the past. This has been a daunting challenge considering its inexperience and the organisational changes needed before it could fulfil its functions. NGOs were thus expected to help the government to deliver services. While IDASA’s objective is to monitor the government’s compliance with democratic principles, it took up the challenge to help the same government build institutions. Since 1994 it has chosen to work closely with the government to help build institutional capacity, arguing that key social goals cannot be achieved unless government structures are sound. IDASA has identified institution-building in government, especially at the local level, as its key objective.

Thus, with a United Kingdom-based partner, IDASA won a European Union tender to facilitate the provision of high-quality training to senior civil servants. It worked with the Mpumalanga department of land affairs (with funding from the SDC) in appointing an

⁵² SDC pamphlet, Pretoria.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Interview, Graham.

agency to establish and run a land reform support office⁵⁵ which helped thousands of farm workers and farmers establish their rights and claims to land. The Soshanguve peace and development project, funded by the German government, is aimed at developing co-operation between unemployed youth and the South African Police Service by employing 100 people who work at night in community watches against crime and as a link with the local police station. During the day they are trained in life skills so that, when the project ends, they can find employment. In 1999 IDASA also helped the Demarcation Board to chair hearings in 147 areas to establish new local government boundaries. Before that it ran a toll-free information service on demarcation. Since 1994, IDASA has initiated consultations with donors and political leaders at all levels of government which has resulted in several projects based on a triangular partnership of donors, government departments, and IDASA (and, in some cases, other public interest organisations).⁵⁶ More generally, it 'has provided services to national and provincial government departments'.⁵⁷

IDASA relates to the government in different ways. It has good relations with some government departments (provincial affairs and local government), parliamentary portfolio committees (such as finance, foreign affairs, correctional services, and home affairs), and some provincial legislatures. It does not, however, have a relationship with the president's office,⁵⁸ although it does work with a desk in the office charged with children's programmes. Among its less obvious services to the government are:

- Portfolio committees do not keep minutes. The only record available is the parliamentary monitoring division report produced by IDASA, which also offers a wide range of information about parliament.
- The Open Democracy Advice Centre (ODAC) helps to ensure that government information is available to government officials, parliamentarians and CSOs.

Does this close engagement threaten IDASA's principles? In principle, there is no contradiction in NGOs, even advocacy groups, working with government. The state and civil society are not in contradiction to each other but are mutually dependant, and their roles are complementary: democracy cannot function without a civil society that represents the widest possible range of citizen opinion, but nor can civil society play its role without the rights extended by democracy. Former CSO strategist Jacqui Boule thus stresses 'the responsibility of government to create an enabling legislative and institutional environment' for CSOs'.⁵⁹ This could be read to imply a CSO interest in ensuring that government has the capacity to do so.

However, close relations with government could prompt abandonment of civil society's watchdog role. IDASA's response is that it does its advocacy work through other organisations. Through its training and education programme it offers them help to better understand issues pertaining to their specific interest, so that they can be in a position to

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ IDASA, Annual report 1995, p 26.

⁵⁷ IDASA, Annual report 1997, p 11.

⁵⁸ Interview, Graham.

⁵⁹ Reitzes, State/civil society relations.

challenge government. Thus, when it trains workers on labour laws, it equips them to defend their workplace rights. It also works with youth commissions to improve their advocacy work, and helps COSATU to understand government budget reforms. COSATU, of course, has the capacity to use this information for advocacy: ‘We think the people we train are best placed to do advocacy work. And if they are better trained and skilled to take up the challenge of confronting the state, IDASA’s goal of making government accountable is also met.’⁶⁰ This suggests that IDASA’s understanding of democracy is linked to an active role for civil society in holding government to account, and that it sees itself as a conduit or broker between state and society, fostering social and political participation.

IDASA has therefore not abandoned advocacy – it also at times engages in direct lobbying. It is not uncritical of the government, as its publications demonstrate. Nor does it engage only with it. It also works publicly and privately with the main parties and ideological tendencies to achieve democratic outcomes.⁶¹ In a democracy in which one party dominates, it is important to also help weak parties to play a role between elections. And its POS does attempt to contribute to public debate on democratisation by polling voter sentiment – a role that inevitably takes on a heightened profile at election time. This aspect of its work goes beyond mere reportage: thus the POS claims it has demonstrated that many voters are not solidly committed to their parties along racial and ethnic lines.⁶² Inevitably, this work sparks debate; critics argue that this analysis has not been vindicated by voter behaviour.

According to Graham, IDASA’s advocacy work differs from that of many other groups in that it is engaged in ‘constructive criticism’ that proposes alternatives to a particular course of action.

IDASA’s role is not to criticise the government. Instead, we try to find why it is not delivering on its promises. If we find that it is because it lacks capacity or it is because of ignorance, we make sure we provide skills and awareness to it.⁶³

James goes further: since the state is its major concern, it is important that IDASA maintains better relations with it. IDASA argues that it is not lack of will or bad faith that prompts the government to make mistakes or not implement its intentions: South Africa is not Zimbabwe. A liberalised political climate exists, and it is lack of capacity that hampers government’s work.

But some analysts believe IDASA’s dual role is weakening the democracy it is meant to safeguard. Critics argue that unless it is independent of government, it is unrealistic to expect it to hold it to account and give citizens a voice in decision-making. They see

⁶⁰ Interview, Lindiwe Ndelela of IDASA, Pretoria, 2000.

⁶¹ IDASA, Annual report 1997, p 3.

⁶² IDASA, Annual report 1999 .

⁶³ Interview, Graham.

IDASA's closeness to the government as a response to attacks on it which, they argue, have caused it to retreat from an independent stance.

A key event here was former president Nelson Mandela's attack on NGOs during his address to the 50th congress of the ANC in December 1997. James notes that he 'singled out NGOs not for praise or presidential affirmation, but for a stinging rebuke'. He adds that 'NGOs were lumped together in clusters, the good and the bad; those who serve the interest of their donors and those who do not. They were portrayed as stumbling blocks to the achievement of South Africa's historical project.'⁶⁴ Mandela's remarks were widely believed to have been authored by then deputy president Thabo Mbeki, whose administration has, in the view of some commentators, further reduced government enthusiasm for an independent advocacy role for NGOs.⁶⁵ And they were also said to have been aimed primarily at IDASA, which had angered the ANC by publishing a public opinion survey indicating a widespread belief among citizens that corruption had increased since 1994.⁶⁶

IDASA is also said to have reassessed its strategy in reaction to the incident sparked by a letter from James to the Open Society Foundation, predicting that Mbeki's government would be 'tougher and more obscure'.⁶⁷ James, who notes now that the letter was 'a pure fundraising exercise', argued further in the letter 'that the pressure to concentrate executive power will increase with a failure to deal with issues of delivery on the ground'.⁶⁸ In this view, government intolerance of criticism is a consequence of the 'delivery' pressures it is facing. There was less criticism of the Mandela government by public commentators, since it was generally considered to be an administration of transition characterised by intense policy formulation and reconciliation efforts. The Mbeki government is under tremendous pressure to deliver, and public perceptions of failure to implement most of its policies have ruffled its feathers. So the clash is interpreted by James, ingeniously, as a reminder to work more closely with the government, not to appease it but to address the capacity constraints which are said to cause the conflict.

This incident did, however, show that it is not always easy for NGOs to work with government and to criticise it at the same time. It demonstrates that there is a tension between the two roles played by IDASA: that of service provider, and that of advocacy organisation. Since this incident, IDASA has become more conscious of its engagement with the government – its staff now think twice before criticising it – and the clash has made it more difficult for IDASA to access government officials. But it may be useful to see it also as a symptom of a wider battle between state and CSOs to establish themselves as the legitimate voice of the South African people which, by implication, implies rights to foreign aid. As implied earlier, this ignores the complementary roles of state and civil soci-

⁶⁴ Interview, James.

⁶⁵ Reitzes, State/civil society relations.

⁶⁶ IDASA public opinion service, *Parliamentary ethics and government corruption: playing with public trust*, POS report no 3, February 1996

⁶⁷ *Sunday Independent*, 6 December 1998.

⁶⁸ Interview, James.

ety (as well as the latter's diversity). The key issue is how the inevitable tension between the two is managed. James acknowledges that 'some NGOs have not adjusted to the new political dispensation. They are still within the anti-apartheid mode where every government move must be opposed', and notes that, to avoid tension, IDASA's board decided to lower its profile and avoid contention with the government,⁶⁹ which does seem to indicate an IDASA retreat even if it can be justified by means of the need for a government-NGO partnership.

The government and IDASA continue to co-operate – witness the latter's training of local government officials, and its work on a government-commissioned report on education. This shows a maturity – the government and CSOs can disagree in public and still work together on policy issues and capacity-building – although this does not happen with all government departments. But IDASA may not retain its independence for long if it becomes largely dependent on co-operation with the government to fund its work. More generally, the dramatic cut in funding experienced by civil society and the perceived lack of donor sensitivity to the plight of CSOs⁷⁰ may force NGOs into a cosy relationship with the state prompted by a need for resources.

Many donors do not share suspicions of a government strategy to incorporate NGOs: they note cases in which the government has asked donors to give money directly to NGOs to avoid red tape. Thus DANIDA gives money to NGOs involved in strengthening the justice system, and CIDA gives directly to CSOs interested in education; the South African department of finance is always informed. According to NGO specialist Alan Fowler, these developments are neither unique to South Africa nor necessarily a guarantee of independence to NGOs: 'Increasingly, NGOs are required to fit into non-participatory systems of development administration. To ensure that their priorities and endeavours conform with national development priorities, they are increasingly obliged to have their activities approved through the bureaucratic procedures used by the government itself.'⁷¹ But, for NGOs, working with the government offers an opportunity to expand the scope of their operations, broaden their influence, and participate in the formulation of the national development agenda.⁷²

CSOs are also usually subcontracted to implement agreements between donors and the South African government. Lindiwe Ndlela, IDASA's local government programme manager, gives an example: in 1995, on Graham's initiative, CIDA and the department of constitutional development agreed to establish an information centre to educate voters on that year's local election. This included a toll-free telephone facility. IDASA was given the responsibility for managing the project, which was overseen by a steering committee comprising CIDA, government, and IDASA representatives.

⁶⁹ Interview, James

⁷⁰ P Daya and R Govender, *Database and analysis of ODA to South Africa for the period 1994-9*.

⁷¹ Fowler, cited in Hennie Swanepoel, *NGOs in development*, 1992, 2ds W J O Jeppe, F Theron J P J van Baalen, University of Stellenbosch, p 16.

⁷² Sarah C White, NGOs, civil society, and the state in Bangladesh: the politics of representing the poor, *Development and change* 30 (1999), 307-26, 1999.

Partnership between the government and CSOs is clearly a donor preference – CSOs are able to obtain funds from donors where they can show they are able to build these partnerships.⁷³ Steve Hallihan, counsellor (development) at the Canadian High Commission, says: ‘CSOs will continue to play an important role in society. Today we know their strength and weaknesses as agents of development. Their work and that of government are complementary.’ He adds that government commitment to improving the implementation of its welfare and development programmes implies an ever increasing role for CSOs.⁷⁴ The key here is a notion of CSOs as delivery agents rather than as vehicles of citizen voice. There may another turnaround in donor strategy in the offing – donor representatives point to a possibility of returning to the pre-1994 scenario in which donors give money directly to NGOs because the government is not seen to be delivering on expectations. But again, this seems to signal an interest in implementation rather than advocacy. Government departments are said to lack the flexibility, detailed knowledge, or imagination to reach the individual and communal needs of the poor, and NGOs are said to be able to play an important part in filling that vacuum. If, as seems likely, NGOs will be expected to implement rather than challenge policy, it will simply represent a switch to partnership by other means.

This approach might be partly justified if, as some analyses imply, we have a strong civil society and a state that is incapacitated but open to citizen influence – one donor refers to its programme as reversing a historical bias against the state in South Africa necessitated by apartheid.⁷⁵ But, while a critical voice still emanates from NGOs, its impact has been reduced by the lack of resources in this sector;⁷⁶ the Interfund survey of 1996 found that the main cause of the collapse of CSOs was the withdrawal of donor funding, particularly by the European Union and USAID.⁷⁷ While funds are now meant to be channelled through vehicles created by the government – the Transitional National Development Trust and National Development Agency (NDA) – only a fraction of the money previously available is likely to be disbursed via these channels.⁷⁸

The second issue, government openness, is subject to much controversy. One view argues that, during the Mandela administration, there wasn’t much need for criticism because attention was primarily focused on policy formulation. But since 1998 NGO–government relations have deteriorated. A contrary view states that government has merely been engaged in vigorous debate with civil society and that, while civil society

⁷³ Caroline Kihato, Civil society --donor relations, unpublished paper, Centre for Policy Studies.

⁷⁴ Steve Hallihan, Interview, Pretoria, 2000.

⁷⁵ Interview, Helmut Orbon, GTZ, Pretoria, 5 April 2001.

⁷⁶ *Development Co-operation Report II for South Africa, 1994-9*, International Organisation Development, Britain, August 2000. See also Wilmot James and Daria Caliguire, Renewing civil society, *Journal of Democracy* 7(1), January 1996, p 63.

⁷⁷ Zane Dangor, *The non-profit sector in South Africa*, Charities Aid Foundation, 1997; Daya and Govender, *Database and analysis of ODA to South Africa for the period 1994-9*.

⁷⁸ SANGOCO, Progress towards the establishment of the National Development Agency (NDA), www.sangoco.org.za Kihato, Civil society --donor relations; *Sunday Independent*, 15 March 1998

has the right to criticise the government, the latter does not have the right to criticise civil society. In reality, it is argued, conflict of this sort is essential to democracy: 'Both state and civil society are essentially political and contested domains, in both conceptual and practical terms. Not to recognise this is to rely on a simplistic deployment of totemic motifs.'⁷⁹

Regardless of which analysis is accepted, it seems reasonable to assume that the government will not remain open to citizen participation and influence for long if it does not face independent CSOs engaged in vigorous advocacy – just as it will not be able to respond to vigorous CSOs if it lacks capacity.⁸⁰ Achieving this balance is the key challenge facing IDASA. There is a danger that, the more civil society engages in partnership with government, the more there is a disincentive to criticise corruption or maladministration – but an equally real prospect that the government will lack the capacity to respond effectively to citizens' concerns. To assess how this challenge is faced in practice, we turn to a brief discussion of two IDASA projects, one of which is devoted largely to enhancing government capacity, while the other creates substantial room for advocacy.

Assessing IDASA

Training local councillors

IDASA's local government information centre (LOGIC) conducts a range of projects involving research and public information. But most resources are devoted to training councillors to empower them and their constituents for effective, accountable, governance and service delivery.

LOGIC began in 1996 and was funded by DANIDA for two years and then by the SDC. But, to ensure its sustainability, it competes for local government contracts, such as that from the department of provincial affairs to manage the production of booklets in six languages explaining how local government will function after the 2000 election.⁸¹ It is the training of councillors, however, that gives an insight into IDASA's government capacity-building function.

One municipality at which IDASA has trained councillors is the Vryburg district council in North West province. Councillors consider the training to have been successful, since it has helped them to understand the way the council works. A councillor insists that this has prompted a 'huge improvement in the way we run our affairs'.⁸² According to IDASA, the course offers a broad range of information: topics include understanding local government, the councillor, municipal finance, labour relations act, and new municipal structures and systems. Broader issues such as gender in local government are

⁷⁹ White, *NGOS, civil society, and the state in Bangladesh ...*, p 309.

⁸⁰ See CPS, *Assessment of USAID democracy and governance programme, 1997*.

⁸¹ IDASA, *Annual report 1999*.

⁸² Interview, Vryburg councillor, 2000.

also addressed. (This range of courses, however, seems available in Northern Province but not North West). There is some criticism of the project's perceived lack of monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, and complaints about a lack of follow-up from donors and IDASA, but the council would like it to continue. In response to these criticisms, IDASA says it conducts impact studies on its projects to assess them. LOGIC adds that it has always been concerned to offer monitoring, evaluation, and 'follow-up', but has until recently been constrained by a lack of funds. Initially, the need for training was such that it took precedence over everything else; but even at that stage, at the end of each training session, participants would complete an evaluation form. Funds did not allow any more elaborate method. The councillors' concern over a follow-up expressed a perceived need for IDASA's presence and support between training workshops – 'on-the-job training'. The new project funded by DANIDA goes some way towards meeting this: councils do not only attend workshops but can also undertake study tours; 'experts' not only address them but mentor officials. Councillors and officials can visit other councils deemed to have devised 'best policies'.⁸³

Councillor enthusiasm seems to be promoted chiefly by the role of the training provided in imparting information on administrative procedures, part of a broader LOGIC concern to introduce councillors to the practicalities of local government which also includes informing municipalities on new legislation. But there also seems to be a demand by councillors – and an IDASA willingness to provide – training on how to mobilise resource to achieve the delivery of services. Some councillors wish IDASA to become involved in the practicalities of service provision, and Ndlela says this has already begun. She adds, however, that LOGIC is not training councillors on how to deliver services but that all training manuals emphasise the use of their representative capacity to unlock resources for service delivery.⁸⁴

This latter qualification is very important. The fact that councillors interviewed expressed an interest in service delivery (although LOGIC says this has never been expressed to it) reflects the current ethos within government at all levels: material delivery is considered to be a far greater priority than democratic deepening – in this view, the task of government is to 'get things done', not to ensure that citizens have a voice.⁸⁵ The interviews conducted with governmental donors for this study imply that this is a preference of donors too. It is, however, precisely the task of councillors to ensure that citizens are heard rather than to usurp the implementation function of officials. If the IDASA programme is encouraging councillors to think of themselves as implementers rather than representatives, it would be weakening democracy. Indeed, it could be argued that a key task of an organisation concerned with building democracy would be to offer an alternative that stresses the need for councillors to deepen their links with their voters, and to fight for their interests.

⁸³ Interview, Graham; personal communication, Lindiwe Ndlela, 25 May 2001.

⁸⁴ Interview, Ndlela.

⁸⁵ Steven Friedman, Who we are: voter participation, rationality and the 1999 election, *Politikon*, Johannesburg, 26(2), 1999.

Ndlela insists that LOGIC is not turning councillors into implementers. She argues that mobilising resources for service delivery is important because funds are usually locked in the province or national departments, and that it is important that both councillors and officials are aware of this so that they can press for the release of resources which will bring much-needed services to citizens. LOGIC, she adds, has never seen councillors as implementers: on the contrary, it has always emphasised that councillors make policy, and officials implement it. This point of departure is stressed in the manual on The Councillor. It also seeks to ensure that councillors have a 'grounded' understanding of processes such as passing the budget or integrated development plans (IDPs). This, she says, is crucial if councillors are to hold the technicians to account; it does not seek to turn them into functionaries in service delivery.⁸⁶

Councillor enthusiasm for training in an administrative rather than representative function is itself significant. While it is clearly a crucial aspect of representative capacity-building to ensure that councillors are aware of council rules and procedures, training that focuses only on these aspects risks assuming that councillors are fully versed in the techniques of representation. Given low levels of public trust in local government identified by IDASA's own POS,⁸⁷ this seems highly unlikely. To the extent that training focuses only on the administrative dimension, it is likely to leave the quality of representation in a parlous state. Again, IDASA stresses that it is aware of the problem, and that it addresses it through a stress on the representative function in its courses.

At present, therefore, the training programme plays a vital role in capacitating councillors to do what they were elected to do. It is also hard to fault the view that councillors need to understand technicalities if they are to know how to engage with them on behalf of their voters. While IDPs, for example, are open to the criticism that they seek to turn councillors and councils into planning technicians, councillors cannot perform their representative functions unless they are familiar with these processes. Also, pressing other spheres of government to release funds needed by local constituencies is a representative, not an administrative, role. Therefore, the LOGIC training programme may well represent a much-needed intervention aimed at strengthening the representative function at a time when it is in danger of being relegated to a role in ensuring that central government policy be implemented. Given the pressure on councillors to play a technical role, the message may often be ignored. IDASA may also need to exercise constant vigilance to ensure that training does not become diverted on to paths which ensure that the democratic benefits of partnership are greatly outweighed by the costs. But these dangers are perhaps inevitable risks associated with a partnership with the government in the vital task of strengthening representative democracy.

⁸⁶ Personal communication, Ndlela, 25 May 2001; integrated development plans are planning exercises which all councils are required to undertake.

⁸⁷ IDASA, *A submission to the white paper secretariat by the IDASA public opinion service*, December 1997

The children's budget project

IDASA's budget information service seeks to monitor the impact of fiscal decision-making on low-income and marginalised communities;⁸⁸ it distributes its material to CSOs and legislatures⁸⁹ in order to build the capacity of civil society and parliament to participate in budgetary debates. Its material consists of monitoring national and provincial budgets and budgetary processes, research and analysis; and training and publishing (print and electronic). It has five subprojects that measure the impact of the budget on children, women, intergovernmental fiscal relations, and the military.

In 1995 South Africa ratified the UN convention on the rights of the child. Thereafter, children's rights activists and the government joined forces to develop the national programme of action for children (NPA).⁹⁰ The children's budget is one product of this alliance. It is a subproject of the budget information service, which assesses government programmes benefiting children against commitments to the UN convention on the rights of the child, and aims to 'help government and civil society in compiling an effective set of programmes to meet children's needs within current budgetary constraints'. It was initiated and designed in consultation with key stakeholders in children's rights advocacy, including the National Children's Rights Committee (NCRC), the NPA, and UNICEF. Initially, IDASA was in partnership with the Youth Development Trust. They used USAID money and then approached Radda Barnen (Save the Children Sweden) to provide the initial funding. After two successful years the Norwegian Institute for Human Rights joined in funding the project. Today it is run by IDASA alone.

Radda Barnen obviously funds the project as it specialises in protecting children's rights, while the Norwegian Institute for Human Rights is concerned to encourage the use of an international human rights instrument, the UN children's charter.⁹¹ Funders were also convinced that IDASA's capacity and instruments best placed it to produce information required by NGOs seeking to monitor the government's performance.⁹²

The project consists of research, dissemination, monitoring, and advocacy. Information is published but also disseminated via training on how to use the information which IDASA offers to other NGOs as well as government representatives from the public service and legislatures.⁹³ Advocacy groups interested in children's rights are therefore equipped with the information needed to monitor government actions and lobby for better expenditure on children. The government also uses the research to report to the UN convention on the rights of the child.

One CSO that benefits from IDASA training and information is the Gender Advocacy Programme. Its director, Rosieda Shabodien, says: 'At this stage in the transition' the

⁸⁸ IDASA, *Annual report 1996*, p 15.

⁸⁹ www.IDASA.org.za/bis/bis-mission.html.

⁹⁰ Shirley Robinson and Linda Biaersterker, *First call, the South Africa children budget*, IDASA, 1997, p viii.

⁹¹ Mastoera Sadan, IDASA children's budget project manager, interview, Cape Town, 2000.

⁹² Interview, Nomakhwezi Malahleha, co-ordinator, Save the Children Sweden, Pretoria, 2001.

⁹³ Warren Krafchik, BIS, response to e-mail message.

project plays a vital role in providing organisations with the information they need ‘for policy consumption, advocacy and monitoring’.⁹⁴ While the project also attracts claims that its impact is not monitored or evaluated – IDASA again says that it regularly reports to the donor on progress⁹⁵ – it appears that it does fulfil its primary purpose of empowering CSOs to lobby for change.

What is not clear from the information available is the degree to which the project also capacitates the government to respond to demands. Consistent with IDASA’s concern to work with the government, the project attempts to cater for both sides of the democratic equation : the ability of interest groups to make claims, and the state’s ability to respond to them. Given that children are not enfranchised and that their concerns are likely to reach the government through intermediaries only, this project is likely to evoke much more enthusiasm from NGOs than from the government. But, while the evidence suggests that IDASA is enhancing the effectiveness of advocates of children’s rights, the impact of this programme would depend to a significant degree on the extent to which it also elicits a more responsive approach from the government.

Conclusion: partnership’s perils

Is IDASA’s understanding of democracy and its strategy for strengthening it adequate? And what does continued donor support for it tell us about the donor role in efforts to build a lasting democracy here?

First, IDASA clearly seeks to promote liberal democracy. This does not mean that it necessarily seeks liberal policy outcomes – we have seen that it is far closer to the government than to the liberal opposition. But it does mean support for the democratic form that has become established in the north and has since spread across the globe. It is the brand whose current pervasiveness has been noted by one of IDASA’s co-founders, Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, who remarks on the degree to which it has become hegemonic.⁹⁶ While his view will be challenged by advocates of participatory or other forms of democracy, this observation is hardly as controversial as it might have been a decade or two ago. Certainly, IDASA’s version of democratic form is the subject of broad consensus in South Africa today. There is support within IDASA for a narrow view of liberal democracy in which citizens’ expectation that it should produce material improvement is regarded as a sign of inadequate democratic understanding.⁹⁷ Also, the dogged insistence of its POS that race is not a prime determinant of voting allegiances in South Africa has been criticised on the grounds that it seeks, contrary to the evidence, to remake the country in the idealised image of a northern democracy. However, these are not necessarily the organisation’s views. It adopts a broad and expansive view of liberal democracy, as

⁹⁴ Rosieda Shabodien, Interview, Cape Town, 2000.

⁹⁵ Interview, Sadan.

⁹⁶ Frederik Van Zyl Slabbert, *The quest for democracy: South Africa in transition*, Johannesburg: Penguin, 1992.

⁹⁷ Robert Mattes and Hermann Thiel, Consolidation and public opinion in South Africa, *Journal of Democracy*, 9 (1), 1998, pp 95--110.

programmes such as its budget information service show. The key question posed here, therefore, is the degree to which IDASA's understanding of the strategy required to entrench liberal democracy in South Africa withstands analytical scrutiny.

Firstly, it has been suggested here that IDASA's stress on the 'demand' and 'supply' side of democracy, on the assumption that representative democracy requires active participation by capacitated CSOs and a government equipped to respond to demands, does represent an appropriate understanding of the demands of liberal democratic strengthening in South Africa conditions. It has also been argued that co-operation between IDASA and the government is, for this reason, not in itself contradictory to IDASA's goal.

However, this partnership poses an obvious challenge to IDASA: to ensure that the relationship is an effective means to an end – strengthening democracy – rather than an end in itself. The claim that government responsiveness to citizens is directly related to technical capacity – in the sense that the government is likely to be less tolerant of citizen influence if it feels beleaguered by claims that it is not delivering – is highly debatable. Even if it were conceded that it applied, as James suggests, to government—NGO relations, this does not explain why there has been a discernible gap between what the government understands the priorities of grass-roots citizens to be and the reality⁹⁸ during both administrations. This questions the degree to which the task of strengthening liberal democracy can be reduced simply to making government 'work better' in a technical sense.

Secondly, and similarly, the brief analysis of the local government training programme presented here has emphasised the need for IDASA to continue stressing the role of councillors in reflecting local choices and needs rather than simply implementing the decisions of national elites – which is also unlikely to 'deliver' goods effectively, since an understanding of the priorities and values of grass-roots citizens is central to effective 'delivery', but is unlikely if the representative function is not strengthened. IDASA is well aware of this need, but is certain to need to keep it firmly in mind as it faces pressure to assist the implementation of central government policies rather than a reflection of local choices.

To be sure, more is at stake in the relationship with government than democratic theory. IDASA has ample evidence, noted above, that the promotion of democracy in South Africa has considerable capacity to prompt unwanted political attention, indicating that maintaining credibility with the government while continuing to promote citizen participation is not easy. But, while this obviously places enhanced pressure on IDASA's political skills (reservations could be expressed on the wisdom of writing letters that seem to seek to raise funds on the strength of the next president's shaky commitment to democracy), IDASA's experience also shows that there is enough diversity in the government as well as South African society to ensure that credibility can be won by methods other than simply endorsing strategies that are unlikely to strengthen democracy.

⁹⁸ Craig Charney, *Voices of a new democracy: African expectations in the new South Africa*, Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies, 1995; Mary Tomlinson, *From rejection to resignation: beneficiaries' views of the government's housing subsidy scheme*, Johannesburg: Centre for Policy Studies, 1997; Friedman, Friedman, Who we are: voter participation, rationality, and the 1999 election.

Third, IDASA's co-operation with other CSOs is worthy of brief comment. Its ability to encourage citizen participation in democratic government – a key feature, in IDASA's understanding, of liberal democracy, whose architects certainly did not intend to reduce it to regular elections only – is restricted to work with other organisations rather than with grass-roots citizens themselves. Critics see this as evidence of an elitism which prompts IDASA to ignore, for example, the empowerment of farm employees and the landless. This is, it seems, not IDASA's preference – it has been partly necessitated by funding constraints that have forced it, for example, to end the employment of grass-roots political officers. In any event, reaching down to the grass roots is hardly easy, and a strategic decision that seeks to reach the 'base' of society via other CSOs may reflect a far more rational use of resources: among the recipients of its budget information is, for example, COSATU, still the largest and most organised vehicle of citizen participation in the country. But it does mean that this aspect of IDASA's activity largely depends on the representativeness of the CSOs with which it engages. This suggests that the point made about representation also needs to be extended to IDASA's engagement with CSOs: that it might be more effective if it offered not only information but sought to impart techniques of representation and organisation that would strengthen the capacity of its CSO partners to ensure substantial citizen participation in their efforts.

Fourth, South Africa's racial history – and the consequence that government critics are, if they are white, open to the charge that they harbour prejudices that make them hostile to a black-run government – mean that the capacity to encourage particular approaches to governance often depends on the identity of the person making the observation, particularly if it is critical. This implies that the promotion of democracy requires a sensitivity to racial dynamics – an insistence that merit is more important than race is impeccable in principle, but may not accurately describe the realities of policy influence in contemporary South Africa. The reality that virtually all the people who are publicly associated with IDASA are white may not have created problems for it yet – ironically, the only IDASA director to have attracted public government criticism, James, is black – but could at the very least have invisible effects, such as a reluctance to engage in public criticism. This does not necessarily mean a major change in senior personnel, but at least indicates a need to form strong alliances with black-led CSOs.

None of these points are intended to detract from the important role IDASA plays in strengthening South Africa's democratic prospects: as indicated here, its activities span from providing polling data at election time through monitoring the workings of parliament to arming the largest national trade union federation with information enabling it to participate in the national budget debate, and there is little doubt that attempts to achieve a sustainable democracy in South Africa would be much the poorer without it. It is, rather, to invite debate on some of the strategic choices which may face IDASA, and to warn that programmes seeking to build government capacity will have to be undertaken with a continued recognition of the need to keep in the forefront the deepening and strengthening of the representativeness of both elected officials and NGO staff, if they are not to lead to the widening of an already large gap between the elite and the rest of the society which is likely to pose a major obstacle to strengthening democracy.

The donor role

It was noted at the outset that, despite the straitened circumstances of NGOs generally, IDASA enjoys substantial donor support.

Those inclined to attribute both great power and a coherent strategic agenda to donors could find much evidence in this analysis to support a view that sees IDASA as a vehicle for the aims of northern donor governments. Its enthusiasm for liberal democracy coincides with their governments' preferences, and its willingness to work with government neatly fits their strategic understandings. The vagueness with which donors explain their preference for IDASA can, in this view, be understood as a convenient smokescreen in which platitudes are used to hide clear agendas. Donor insistence that IDASA's track record is exemplary, this view would suggest, reflects the degree to which it dances to the tune of those who pay the piper.

It is, however, equally possible to draw evidence from the IDASA case that questions both the ability and capacity of many donors to make or implement strategic judgements of this sort. First, there is at least some evidence that donors do indeed, as some of the responses indicate, place a higher premium on the degree to which administrative and financial requirements are met than on the substance of that which they fund. For example, not all donors bother to send in evaluators to assess projects,⁹⁹ and some do seem content to base their judgement on the meeting of reporting requirements alone. This is hardly a bizarre proposition – like most other officials, donor representatives may well be seized primarily with a desire not to land in trouble with superiors. Since evaluating projects is hardly an exact science to begin with, it is not hard to understand how ensuring that the money was not spent fraudulently might be a far greater priority than 'making waves' by challenging the impact of a project.

Secondly, it does not seem either overly cynical or unfair to suggest that donor officials, like everyone else, are influenced by their peers – or that organisations led by people with established national reputations are likely to be better able to attract funding than their rivals. If this claim is accurate, IDASA hardly started life with a disability. Its two founders were celebrated national politicians whose decision to leave white parliamentary politics to pursue a negotiated settlement won wide respect abroad as well as at home. Both, but Slabbert in particular, had extensive contacts with donors. Therefore, it may well be that IDASA initially attracted funding because of the identity of its founders, and that this set in motion a self-perpetuating cycle in which, once in the loop, it was harder to drop out than to stay in. This must be qualified: despite the reservations mentioned here, IDASA has had a significant impact on democracy's prospects here, and donors who wanted to support democratisation did receive value for money. It may also have remained in the loop because it did produce work of high quality, rather than because each departing generation of donor officials recommended it to the next. But there is evidence for an alternative to the explanation that sees donor support for IDASA as a product of strategic coherence.

⁹⁹ Interview, Ndlela.

Thirdly, it has already been noted that donor understandings of democratic strategy in South Africa are extraordinarily vague. Indeed, the attempt in this paper to analyse broad statements that conceal rather than elucidate choices – such as that between strengthening technical efficiency and representative capacity – is open to the objection that it seeks to assign meaning where little or none was intended. Anecdotal evidence and personal experience tend to support the view that donor attitudes often owe more to faddishness and the vague hope that what is said to have worked in one context may do so in another¹⁰⁰ than to considered strategy.

Again, this may well accord more with common sense than the conspiratorial explanations. The extremely indifferent record of overseas development assistance (ODA) in achieving any of its stated objectives illustrates the point that understanding the requirements of a faraway country in which officials spend a few years at most is not easy – and if that point applies to attempts to promote development, it surely applies even more to democratisation, which often requires subtle readings of local dynamics. The likelihood that aid will be based on sophisticated strategic understandings is further diminished by the reality that governmental donors are also conducting a bilateral diplomatic relationship with the recipient country and that, where democratisation strategy might entail offending the host country, the optimal strategy will not be pursued. These points raise profound doubts about the degree to which it is realistic to expect donors to develop a coherent strategy to assist democratisation anywhere – successes in this view are as likely to be a result of luck, or the intangible ability to tell quality from dross, than strategy. But, if that is considered too extreme a view, this analysis presents more than enough reason to understand why donor agencies' platitudes may express their strategic limitations more than it hides their intentions.

Fourth, while it may seem obvious that donors support IDASA because of its liberal democratic affinities, not even that is certain. While this organisation may well be more congenial to North Americans and Europeans, it has been a peculiar feature of donor funding in South Africa that many of the 'standard' rules of donor behaviour do not apply – well after 1994, for example, USAID was funding the Institute for African Alternatives, whose development agenda for Africa could hardly be described as liberal-democratic. While it is possible to demonstrate that these choices are the result of political factors rather than an inability to read documentation,¹⁰¹ it again cautions against rushing into judgement on either donor motives or capacity. In this case, the exigencies of domestic politics may well have ensured that donors could not play the role which their broader strategy might dictate.

Fifth, while IDASA's decision to move closer to government fits donor preferences, it is hardly a foregone conclusion that it did this purely to satisfy donors – certainly, local political considerations such as Mandela's ANC conference speech and government reac-

¹⁰⁰ Interview, Kraak.

¹⁰¹ Shubane, *Local content: the politics of European and American donor intervention in SA under apartheid*.

tion to the James letter may have played a significant role in strengthening a decision that was made relatively early in the post-1994 period.

Despite these considerations, however, an analysis that denies any donor influence on IDASA's strategy seems as inadequate as one which reduces this organisation to a vehicle for donor intentions. Since, despite its endowment, it needs project funding, it is forced, like other non-profit organisations, to tailor its activities to ensure that they are fundable. This does not deny it latitude to align its concerns with those of donors, but it ensures that it does not have an unlimited range of options.

Most clearly, however, the strong donor preference for NGOs that act in partnership with the government and its corollaries, sharply reduced funding for CSOs, and diminished support for advocacy has clearly created a situation in which working with government becomes far more necessary for organisations which wish to survive financially. While the children's budget project is but one example that the slack can, to a degree, be taken up by non-governmental funders, the fact remains that the largest funders, the governmental donors, are in effect responsible for shoe-horning South African CSOs into a strategy which is, in the donors' home countries, a choice rather than a requirement. At a time when the immediate future of South African democracy may depend on the extent to which government respect can be won for the notion that organisations that speak independently for citizens are as important a resource as those that work with government to implement policy, the limits of foreign political aid's democratisation potential may well be demonstrated by the degree to which the world's most established democracies use their funds to undermine that view.