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## Random Thoughts on Joel Barkan's "Thirteen Lessons From the Field"

Rene Lemarchand, USAID/REDSO (Abidjan)

Taken together these lessons stand as an important contribution to our understanding of USAID's DG initiative in Africa: in addition to giving the reader a sense of the scope and complexity of the undertaking, they raise a host of important issues in the design and implementation of DG interventions, ranging from how best to conceptualize democratic governance (Lesson 1: Do not reinvent the conceptual wheel) to a critical examination of the operational problems involved in relating means to ends, programs to policies (Lessons 3-8). The result is an impressive effort to rethink the context, the tools and policy implications of USAID's DG initiative in Africa.

This stock-taking exercise could not have come at a more opportune moment. Tempting though it is to see in the Nigerian disaster an omen of future setbacks, the record is by no means uniformly bleak. Since the beginning of the year several bright spots have emerged: Burundi, Madagascar, Lesotho and Niger. If recent developments are any index, the boundaries between the given and the possible are never fixed once and for all: the path from autocracy to democracy is not a one way street; nor is the range of transitional patterns reducible to one or the other. This is where a major challenge lies for analysts and policy makers alike -- and where both are likely to profit from Joel Barkan's lessons.

Since I find myself in broad agreement with much of what my East African counterpart has to say the following should not be construed as a rebuttal of his argument, but as an attempt to elaborate some of his points, and add a few others. The perspective I bring to the discussion is informed by a prolonged immersion in the byzantine byways of project development at REDSO/Abidjan, supplemented by three TDYs in Francophone and Anglophone West Africa (Benin, Niger and Ghana). Only through the fortuitous mishandling of my e-mail did I escape an additional one to Senegal. To the extent that my assessment deviates from that of Joel it is perhaps less a reflection of the distinctiveness of the West African environment than of my deliberate effort to look for variations rather than uniformities within it.

At the risk of stating the obvious, and reiterating some of Joel's warnings, let me begin with the following caveats:

\* There are no magic solutions or quick fixes for ushering successful transitions; for all the mystical qualities ascribed to terms like "empowerment", "transparency", "accountability", there are no easy recipes for translating the values for which they stand into stable, regularized patterns of behavior. All that these concepts can do is provide us with approximate guidelines for program interventions or sets of criteria for assessing performance; when it comes to developing strategies for getting from here to there -- from opacity to transparency, from powerlessness to empowerment, from arbitrariness to accountability -- there is no substitute for "muddling through". Like it or not, program interventions must necessarily include a fair amount of trial and error.

\* The road to democracy, in Africa and elsewhere, rarely follows a straight line. A short-term record of democratic performance is hardly sufficient to predict longer-run success. Nigeria is of course the classic (and tragic) example an abortive transition following a most promising gestation period. By contrast, and against

all odds, Burundi emerges as a remarkable success story -- but for how long? The fact that in each state the military played a critical role -- in one case to thwart the electoral process and in the other to ensure its success -- should not go unnoticed; much of the uncertainty about the outcome of democratic transitions is traceable to the unpredictability of the military's reactions to the impending shift of power.

\*Uncertainty about the course of democratization makes for ambivalence in our efforts to identify priorities and directions in DG programming and evaluations. Despite or because of the plethora of data, we are at a loss to fit it into a coherent policy framework. We generally recognize that DG interventions should not be treated as stand-alone projects, yet we cannot agree on the company they should keep. Should projects be designed to "prioritize" popular participation, multi-party competition, freedom of the press, legislative and judicial autonomy, or should they focus on strengthening the technocratic capabilities of the state? Can the social costs of structural adjustment be reconciled with the exigencies of democratic transitions? Should we seek to enhance the power of the state for the sake of economic growth, or is the more important task to stimulate political pluralism in the name of democracy, even at the cost of economic growth? On these and other questions there is little unanimity.

\* The logic of project designing is frequently at variance with the political realities on the ground. Logframing emphasizes internal consistency, feasibility and probability of success in terms of implementation, in compliance with procedural exigencies; African realities, on the other hand, are infinitely more fluid and conflictive, in short more "messy", than most project designs and evaluations would have us believe. Dealing with such realities requires greater flexibility than is currently allowed by standard operating procedures.

With these observations in mind let us now turn to some specific recommendations:

\* DG interventions need to be more carefully tailored to the specificity of transitional situations; our choice of project assistance and strategies cannot be defined in the abstract; they need to be calibrated to the limitations and opportunities created by the dynamics of democratic transitions.

\* Sustained attention should be given to issues of political and administrative decentralization as a means of enhancing the participation of the rural sectors.

\* Neglect of the military as a decisive element in the political equation can only lead to a misunderstanding of the conditions of democratic transitions.

\*In seeking to harness NGOs to DG initiatives we need to gain a clearer picture of their social underpinnings, relative weight and functions

#### **The specificity of transitional situations: The need for contextual adjustments**

Granting that there is no point in trying to "reinvent the conceptual wheel", there is nonetheless a very real need to explore the political terrain. The candidates for DG interventions cover a wide spectrum of political environments. Some, in fact, are so forbidding as to rule out any such interventions (e.g. Chad or Liberia); others are so uncongenial

to human rights and basic freedoms as to raise serious doubts about the usefulness of elections (e.g. Togo, Zaire, Malawi); others still display considerable geographical and sectoral selectivity in their ability to accommodate democratic innovations, to the point where the rural sectors are left virtually untouched (a situation which applies to the vast majority of African states).

This diversity of environments argues for considerable caution in the choice of program interventions. For example, to set in motion a process of electoral administration where there is neither peace nor stability (as in Zaire or Togo), and where the electoral process is bound to lead to further bloodshed, does not make a whole lot of sense; a more sensible strategy, pending a more propitious set of circumstances, might be to work through NGOs in cooperation with international donors to monitor, publicize and sanction human rights violations, in hopes that the resulting public outcry will help initiate meaning political reforms (as happened in Burundi after the 1988 killings). Reading through the 109 pages of the 1992 USAID-funded report on "Gender Considerations in Development" in Rwanda makes one wonder what is the pertinence of gender considerations for a country in the throes of civil war. Again, consider the recent request (June 25) from a mission director in a notoriously chaotic state to "finance four magistrates on an observational tour in selected African countries to gain experience on how a Supreme Court functions and to examine the role of its components". Under normal circumstances such a request would have been perfectly legitimate, indeed desirable. Normality in this case, however, means protracted social unrest. The immediate priority in the present circumstances is the creation of minimum conditions of civility that will make it possible for a judicial system to come into being, in short the training not of magistrates but of constabularies.

That some environments are simply not ready for elections (Ethiopia, Chad, Zaire, Rwanda), and will not be for the foreseeable future, is becoming increasingly clear. To see in the verdict of multiparty elections a guarantee of future stability is simply not tenable as a general proposition. As has been shown by Michael Bratton, very few opposition parties are prepared to accept the status of losers, even where elections are reasonably free and fair -- which raises legitimate doubts about the usefulness of election assistance: is there any reason to assume that a more effective monitoring of the electoral process will induce a more cooperative attitude from opposition leaders? And if not, what is the point in spending millions of dollars of taxpayers' money in sending one monitoring team after another into the field?

The issue, however, is not whether or not election assistance makes a difference, but what kinds of assistance are likely to make a difference in any given situation. Vital as it may be in ensuring a minimum of fairness, or in demonstrating the opposite, campaign monitoring is only one of the ways in which a more level playing field might be achieved; others might include screening and updating electoral registers, improving electoral codes, organizing voter education seminars, and so forth. In Burundi, a country where elections have rarely been free and fair, the technical assistance provided through NDI proved invaluable in ensuring the success of the transition, and in so doing it played a critically important role in legitimizing the victory of the opposition. Had the opposition lost, however, its reaction may not have been very different from that of the opposition in Ghana, in Senegal or in the Congo.

What may seem to be an entirely appropriate type of intervention at a given point of a country's evolution may turn out to be irrelevant or dangerously counterproductive at a subsequent stage. Helping create an enabling environment for the rise of opposition forces makes good democratic sense in situations of undiluted authoritarianism; where such

forces are liable to fragment into a host of warring factions, the next stage may be far more difficult to manage. Painful as it is under any circumstances, structural adjustment becomes exceptionally difficult to implement when political liberalization sets in, for it means withdrawing economic and political power from those elements who were the most vocal in their criticisms of the status quo ante. As we now realize, the key to Ghana's success in coping with structural adjustment lies in the fact that it preceded its democratic transition by almost a decade.

Nowhere is the need for "contextual adjustment" greater than when a country moves from a period of democratic transition to one of consolidation. At this juncture accountability emerges as a critical dimension of governance. In order to encourage accountability parliamentary assistance should go hand in hand with strategies designed to build the foundations of a civil society. Parliamentary assistance may involve the provision of technical expertise on economic, financial or juridical questions, invitations to take part in study tours and seminars, making available electronic facilities, etc. Nurturing the civil society also covers a broad spectrum of strategies, ranging from the dissemination of information to the strengthening of the rule of law to the promotion of organizational ties among specific interest groups. Exactly what mix of interventions is appropriate is an empirical question to be decided by program officers after consultation with embassy officials, and significant inputs from local communities.

#### **Administrative/Political Decentralization: Empowering the Rural Sectors**

Consolidating democracy involves more than the institutionalization of accountability at the center; it also requires effective political participation at the grass-roots. This is where strategies of political and administrative decentralization can yield significant dividends.

The case for decentralization can be argued from different perspectives: in addition to providing the basis for expanded participation, it brings accountability closer to the people; it offers opportunities for the resurrection of traditional conciliar organs where these are still in existence, and thus adds legitimacy to accountability; it fits into a number of government-sponsored initiatives (Ivory Coast, Ghana, Guinea, Mali) and opens up fresh opportunities for linking up "privatization" to communalization schemes (as in the Ivory Coast); last but not least, it must be seen as a crucial component of any concerted move to come to terms with ethno-regional insurgencies (as in Mali, Niger, Chad, Sierra Leone).

Whatever the reasons for this (and some may well be legitimate), surprisingly little attention has been paid to issues of decentralization in DG strategies. This situation seems all the more anomalous in view of the wealth of documentation available on the subject. Remarkably thorough case studies are available for Niger, Ghana and Senegal on the general theme of "Decentralization: Improving Governance in Sub-Saharan Africa", all sponsored by the Research and Development Bureau of USAID, managed by ARD in collaboration with the Maxwell School. Instead of using their findings and recommendations to put together specific country strategies and programs, these, as far as one can tell, have been left to gather dust on the shelves of various aid missions. Why this is so remains unclear.

The time has come to give serious consideration to designing local governance strategies that make effective use of this valuable pool of data. Specifically, a special effort must be made to establish the relevance of these country studies to ongoing decentralization schemes, to incorporate their recommendations into comprehensive DG strategies, and to explore ways in which they can be further amended and elaborated

in order to bring them in line with host country priorities.

At the same time, and with due consideration paid to local circumstances, it will be useful to take another look at the "two-speed democracy" formula. The formal institutions of democracy may work out reasonably well in urban settings, where the politically involved are literate, Westernized Africans who are reasonably familiar with l'etat de droit; in rural settings their usefulness is very much in doubt. Hence the need to rethink the meaning of democracy. Institutions that are appropriate for urban communities are less than adequate to meet the needs of village communities. How to identify and assess traditional power structures, values and institutions, and see how they can be reconciled with, or accommodated to the requirements of transparency, accountability and participation is not the least of the difficulties involved in promoting decentralized governance.

#### **The military as a political actor**

So far remarkably little attention has been paid to the role of African armies in democratic transitions. That they constitute a decisive element in the political equation is becoming increasingly clear, however. Exactly how to "factor in" the military in any DG program is not nearly as evident.

Pressures within the military to resist democratic reform come from different sources. Where the transfer of power to civilian elites translates into a shift of authority from one ethnic community to another, one can reasonably expect resistance (as happened in Nigeria), or at least reluctance (as seems to be happening in the Central African Republic and Guinea); so, also, in patrimonial regimes dominated by military cliques (as in Zaire and Togo); anticipated shifts in recruitment patterns and reward systems, along with the prospects of massive reductions in the size of the armed forces and budgetary cutbacks may also come into play.

The stakes involved in democratic transitions thus vary from one context to the next; what may be a reasonable inducement to ensure the neutrality of the military in country A may not work in country B, and what may work at the time of the transition may prove unworkable a few months later.

One of the most illuminating events about the role of African armies took place in Bujumbura from January 31-Feb. 4, when 64 senior military officers and civilian leaders from nine African countries took part in a conference on "Democratization in Africa: The Role of the military". What makes the event especially noteworthy in retrospect is that, despite predictions to the contrary, and perhaps as a result of the conference, the Tutsi-dominated Burundi army appears to have accepted the verdict of the June 1st elections that gave the presidency of the country to a Hutu. That the conference happens to have been initiated by former president Pierre Buyoya, himself a major in the Burundi army, is equally worth noting. The main lesson to emerge from this unusual experiment is that the collaboration of foreign donors, NGOs, civilians and army men may result in highly constructive initiatives even where the circumstances seem the least auspicious.

Looking back to the suggestions made by the participants, William Foltz has identified the following as especially worthy of consideration: (a) education campaigns to be undertaken within the army and civil society, (b) the introduction of human rights as a basic theme in the curricula of the military and all other educational systems, (c) adjusting recruitment patterns to the requirements of a genuinely national army, free ethnic or regional biases, (d) where demobilization programs are under way financial assistance and vocational training should be geared to the reintegration of soldiers into socially and economically productive activities.

Reducing the size of armed forces will not ensure their neutrality; it may nonetheless release badly needed financial resources and lessen the chances of military intervention. External pressure might take the form of specific trade-offs designed to reward military cutbacks with commensurate financial assistance. One observer (Edgar Kagan) suggests that programs aimed at reducing the size of the armed forces should be linked to a broader strategy designed to organize an inter-African peace-keeping force. This would combine the advantage of a readily available African force to deal with local brushfires (thus sparing the UN accusations of acting as a Trojan horse of Western interests, as happened in Somalia) with several side benefits for contributing countries, not the least being that temptations to intervene will decline in proportion to the number of troops being kept busy on peace-keeping operations abroad.

Over and above the issue of reducing the size and cost armed forces there is the question of how best to define the relationship between the military and the civil society, between the military and the police, the police and the gendarmerie, and whether these and other issues ought to be included in a constitutional document. Although the task goes beyond the normal scope of work of DG consultants, it is not beyond their capacity to solicit the assistance of US military missions to explore how these issues can best be handled and where, exactly, they might fit into a country democracy strategy.

#### **NGOs as Partners**

Where state institutions are too weak to sustain the burdens of governance, reliance on NGOs is the only sensible alternative; even where the transition to democracy has been reasonably successful they provide the quickest route to the construction of a civil society. While everyone agrees that NGOs and PVOs have a significant role to play in the design and implementation of DG strategies, what this role ought to be remains unclear.

The problem in part stems from the sheer variety of NGOs. Some deal with relief operations, others with grassroots development activities, some serve as public service contractors, others as advocacy groups, some have dubious credentials, others have an impressive track record in performing the tasks for which they are intended. Not all NGOs are equally suited to act as partners in DG projects. Our choice of NGOs must be based on the kinds of projects being contemplated, and on a careful evaluation of the kinds of functions they can serve.

By and large, what makes NGOs particularly attractive as partners in development is that they have access to the kinds of information that are essential to an understanding of governance issues: World Bank statistics tells very little about levels of poverty in rural areas, gender issues, the effectiveness of rural cooperatives, educational infrastructures and so forth. NGOs are a far better source of information on these issues. Only through NGOs can we gain access to significant data about what our priorities ought to be in terms of governance initiatives. Not until a reasonably accurate picture emerges of the situation prevailing in specific sectors can we begin to set priorities and design strategies of intervention.

Furthermore, NGOs have much greater flexibility than government institutions in responding to crises and changing circumstances. They can create spaces for political innovation; they can change course as the circumstances require; they can draw from the experience of other NGOs to improve their own performance; they can initiate moves to link-up with

other NGOs.

Some are ideally positioned to encourage citizen participation in rural areas. Groupements a Vocation Cooperative (GVC) in Cote d'Ivoire, associations de developpement and parent teachers' associations in Benin, human rights organizations in Niger, and Church groups in general through much of West Africa, have an impressive track record in this regard.

The first step in assessing the role of NGOs in DG initiatives is to question their credentials, and carefully identify their activities: do they have a clear mission statement? What activities and roles are they primarily concerned with? What are their fundraising techniques? What are their relationships to US PVOs? Only if we have a reasonably clear understanding of the answers can we move on to the next step: for what specific purposes can NGOs be contracted? For conducting surveys of gender issues in public sectors? For helping implement low-cost housing? For providing technical assistance to rural cooperatives? Looking at a mission statement may not be enough to find out the answers. The third step is to make effective use of previous NGO experience in other settings. What can we learn, for example, from NGO-sponsored experiments in self-help and grassroots democracy conducted in Burkina that might apply to the Ivory Coast? Finally, and most importantly, we need to assess the relationships of NGOs with governments. Although the level of distrust between NGOs and government varies, tensions are always present. Especially is this the case when we deal with NGOs that stress popular participation, rural empowerment and accountability. Whether to stay out of the pale of government activities, oppose them outright or seek some kind of modus vivendi are some of the critical choices that need to be made.

Perhaps the most significant task awaiting NGOs is to re-examine their strategies for improving their relations with the state, and ultimately for influencing state decisions. Communicating lessons from the field to state officials, sharpening their tools of analysis, reaching out to US PVO so as to increase their leverage and credibility are some of the ways in which their persuasiveness can be increased vis-a-vis the state, and cooperative links created between them.