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The role of aid in the MDG
localisation process

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The role of aid in the MDG localisation process

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1. Introduction

Lack of progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Africa has combined with a number of other factors to increase concern about Africa among multinational and bilateral aid donors, and among the general public in many western nations especially the UK. As I was writing this paper, the leaders of the Group of Eight Industrialised Nations (G8) agreed at the Gleneagles Summit to double aid to Africa by 2010, while African leaders agreed to renew their efforts to improve governance. Meanwhile, civil society organisations were pressurising the G8 to do more for Africa and the European public was swamped by an unprecedented coverage of African issues in the media. However, there is a very real risk that these developments will do more harm than good. This is because they are based on two fallacious assumptions: first, that the problems of development in Africa are simple and the Millennium Goals can easily be met; and second, that massive increases in aid are the best way of meeting them.

This paper examines the naivety of these assumptions and looks at the potential and limitations of aid in helping to achieve the MDGs. The rest of the paper is divi-

ded into three sections. Section 2 examines the nature of "development" in Africa and the role of aid. It argues that development is a long, slow process that must come from within rather than without and that, although external assistance is undoubtedly required, the need is not for increased aid but for major changes in the way in which it is "delivered". Section 3 then considers the implications of this for MDG localisation, drawing on my own experience of externally supported development programmes at district and community level. Finally, section 4 draws some general conclusions and suggests how the role of aid could be enhanced in the process of MDG localisation.

2. Aid and development in Africa

2.1. The complexity of development

"Development" –whether of communities, local governments or nations– is not something that occurs overnight. It is a long, slow and complex process, involving changes in structures, systems and attitudes. Moreover, it is not something that can be driven externally. It must be initiated and led by the individuals and institutions concerned and it must be based not on some universal "model" of development but on individual needs and circumstances. As Fukuda-Parr, Lopes and Malik (2002:8) say:

> For all the universal theories about development, most countries have evolved organically, following their own logic and building on their own resources and strengths. So the assumption that developing countries with weak capacities should simply be able to start again from someone else's blueprint flies in the face of history. For these countries too, the most natural process is development as transformation. This means fostering home-grown processes, building on the wealth of local knowledge and capacities, and expanding these to achieve whatever goals and aspirations the country sets itself.

This is particularly true in the case of governance reforms, which the leaders of both donor and recipient nations acknowledge are critical in achieving the MDGs in Africa. A recent report on research coordinated by the Institute of Development Studies maintains that the process of what Fukuyama (2004) calls "state-building" depends on "striking a balance between effectiveness and accountability" (IDS 2005:2). It goes on to argue that in developed countries this balance emerged through a long process of "interaction, bargaining and competition between holders of state power and organised groups in society", but in many less deve-

loped countries basic "institutions of representation, accountability and adminis-tration" lack "legitimacy and effectiveness" because they were transferred from the developed world rather than "forged through a process of state/society nego-tiation" (Ibid:3).

In other words, development is no more –nor less– than a process of historical change. Unfortunately, too many individuals and institutions involved in interna-tional aid seem to have been forgotten this. For them, development has become an industry (Lopes 2002; Dichter 2003). They assume that, as in any other industry, the required outputs can be produced on demand, to meet given tar-gets; all one needs is the right combination of knowledge, labour and capital. They therefore forget that Africa's current social, economic and political problems cannot be changed overnight because they are deeply rooted in its history pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial.[1]

2.2. The role of aid: rhetoric versus reality

The concept of development outlined above has two major implications in terms of international aid. Firstly, it suggests that the role of aid is inevitably limited because the main initiative for change must come from within. In fact, there is an increasing body of opinion that maintains that large amounts of aid can, at least in certain circumstances, subvert or delay the process of "state-buil-ding" (Moore and Rakner 2002; Sogge 2002; di Renzio 2005; Killick 2005; IDS 2005). In particular, it may discourage efforts to increase domestic revenue, thereby reducing accountability to –and thus pressure for change from– taxpayers. This is obviously an important consideration, given the recent agreement to double aid to Africa.

Secondly, this concept of development has implications in terms of the way in which aid is "delivered". It suggests that aid interventions should be locally "owned", relevant to local needs and conditions, and designed and managed in a way that strengthens local institutional capacity. This in turn suggests a long-term,

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[1] The UK government's recent experience in Nigeria is an interesting case in point (Heymans and Pycroft 2003). Following the election of a civilian government in Nigeria in 1999, the Department for International Development (DFID) embarked upon a number of projects designed to support "pro-poor" public sector reform in four pilot states. The rationale under-lying the projects was that the transfer to a "democratic" government would be sufficient to provide an environment conducive to such reform. However, four years later, DFID had to review its overall strategy in Nigeria because, despite the change in government, Nigeria's public sector continued to be so beset by patronage and corruption that the projects were making little headway.

flexible "learning process" approach,[2] rather than a more conventional "blue-print" one. However, numerous studies of aid show that the reality is often very different (Van de Walle and Johnston 1996; Berg 1997; Lancaster 1999; Fukuda-Parr, Lopes and Malik 2002; Mkandawire 2002; Sogge 2002; Brautigam and Knack 2004; Conyers and Mellors 2005; IDS 2005). A detailed analysis of the problems associated with aid delivery is beyond the scope of this paper. However, they may be broadly summarised as follows:

- Although donors acknowledge the principles of "ownership" and "part-nership", they pay no more than lip service to them;

- New "models" and solutions are constantly "invented" by donors and imposed on recipients in a "blueprint" or "one size fits all" fashion;[3]

- Due to a variety of internal management factors (including the practice of contracting out many tasks to consultants), donor agencies lack in-depth understanding of the needs and conditions in recipient countries;

- Donors impose their own management structures and systems, a problem that puts increasing pressure on already weak administrative systems in the recipient country and undermines attempts to develop indigenous systems;

- This problem is compounded by the large number of donors, each with its own projects and programmes and its own management systems;

- Donors set unrealistic targets in terms of the achievement of objectives and constantly try to "fast track" projects and programmes.

Donors are aware of these problems and recognise that if not addressed they could undermine efforts to achieve the MDGs. Even the World Bank, which is among the worst offenders, acknowledges this, devoting a chapter of its 2004 *World Development Report* to the subject (World Bank 2003:203-17). And in February-March 2005 the OECD's Development Assistance Committee (DAC) organised a High-Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, attended by ministers of developed and developing countries and representatives of multilateral aid agen-

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[2] The concept of a learning process approach was introduced by Korten (1980).

[3] As the aforementioned IDS report points out, "in quick succession, donors have advocated state-led development, then marketisation and the retrenchment of government from core functions, followed by democratisation, decentralisation, the establishment of autonomous agencies, the creation of public-private partnerships, and civil society participation" (IDS 2005:1).

cies. The outcome of this meeting was the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (DAC 2005), which committed both donors and recipients to take concrete steps to, among other things, increase local ownership of interventions, "align" donor inputs with recipient country strategies and management systems, and "harmonise" activities between donors.

The Paris Declaration is a detailed document, based on a thorough analysis of the problems (DAC 2003), and it is undoubtedly a move in the right direction. However, one cannot help being sceptical about its likely impact. There are two main reasons for such scepticism. Firstly, the Declaration does not go far enough. For example, the measures proposed to increase ownership consist merely of the preparation of national development strategies based on widespread public consultation, and the respect of these strategies by donors.[4] Furthermore, it contains a commitment to "results based management", a target-oriented approach which, like the MDGs themselves, could discourage the more flexible learning process approach advocated above (Eyben 2005). Secondly, donors have been aware of these problems for a long time and have made previous commitments to change, but with very little effect (Van de Walle and Johnston 1996; Lancaster 1999; Conyers and Mellors 2005). The main reason for this is that donors have other, conflicting motives and constraints, such as the need to disburse large amounts of money as quickly as possible, to test or prove their own development "models", and to meet their own reporting requirements; and, since the relationship between donor and recipient is inevitably unequal, these motives and constraints tend to dominate.

3. IMPLICATIONS FOR MDG LOCALISATION

3.1. INTRODUCTION

Both the general concept of localising the MDGs and the model for so doing that stresses the importance of local ownership, local actors that internalise and translate the MDGs for the local conditions, and local prioritisation, are consistent with the concept of development outlined above. This model also emphasises the importance of capacity development and implies a process rather than blueprint approach.

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[4] This is little different from what is supposed to happen with the current Poverty Reduction Support Programmes (PRSPs), many of which end up being "owned" by the donor rather than the recipients.

There is already a great deal of experience of using aid to support the type of approach. This section reviews some of this experience and considers the lessons learned. It is divided into two parts; the first part looks at the district or local government level and the second at the community level. As the proposed model makes clear, these two levels are equally important and must be linked if either is to be effective. However, in practice they have often been separated so it is easier to review them separately. In both cases, I begin with a general overview and then look in depth at a case study of "good practice". Both case studies are drawn from Zimbabwe. This is in some respects unfortunate because the policy environment in Zimbabwe is not at present typical of that in the region as a whole. However, in my experience, examples of good practice are few and far between and, having spent most of the last 15 years in Zimbabwe, I found it easier to find appropriate case studies there than elsewhere.

3.2. The district or local government level

In 1988 I co-organised a conference on the role of capacity building in integrated rural development projects (IRDPs) (Warren, Conyers and van Tilburg 1988; Conyers, Mosely and Warren 1988). The conference brought together people from several different countries and aid agencies, all of which had been involved in attempts to transform IRDPs from a conventional blueprint approach, in which the focus was on outputs, to a process approach, in which the main concern was to develop the capacity of district-level institutions. The participants had all learned by experience that this change in approach was necessary if IRDPs were to contribute to sustainable rural development. One of the countries represented at the conference was Zambia, where a DFID-funded IRDP[5] had pioneered the transformation and provided a model adopted by other aid agencies in other parts of the country.

Much has happened since 1988. In one respect the conference was a failure, since it failed to convince donors that IRDPs could still be a viable development approach. As with most development fashions, the donors preferred to abandon the approach and try something new rather than modify it in the light of experience. However, the conference was not a total failure. In Africa, DFID used the lessons learned in Zambia to design both a nationwide local government support

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[5] The UK's aid agency was then actually called the Overseas Development Agency; however, in order to avoid confusion, the name DFID will be used throughout this paper.

programme in that country and a pilot district support project in Zimbabwe. The latter project, in its turn, influenced other donor activities in Zimbabwe, including those of the Netherlands Government and SNV, and was eventually scaled up to become a nationwide programme (DIP 2002). Moreover, some of the lessons learned from the Zimbabwean experience are now being applied elsewhere, particularly in South Sudan.

Meanwhile, other donors have independently developed similar approaches in other parts of the region. Of particular significance is the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF), which has funded pilot district development projects in a number of African countries, including Uganda, Mali, Senegal and Ethiopia (UNCDF 2003), and hosted a regional conference on decentralisation and local development (Smoke 2003). In Uganda, the UNCDF's pilot project was used as a model for a nationwide local government development programme, which is currently in its second phase.[6] Equally significant is the work of the Netherlands Government and SNV –for example, in Tanzania– where pilot projects have again been used as a model for nationwide programmes, and in Uganda, where SNV has developed the concept of "organisational self-assessment" (SNV 2002).

The similarities between these various projects and programmes is remarkable. They all focus on the local government level, involve the provision of both capital funds for local development projects and technical assistance for capacity development, adopt a process rather than a blueprint approach, and emphasise that the role of technical assistance should be to facilitate rather than actually "do". Furthermore, despite the district level focus, they all recognise the need for inputs from local communities, which is where the link with community level experience comes in. In order to learn more about both the potential and the limitations of this approach, particularly in terms of the role of aid, I shall at this point look in more detail at the Zimbabwean experience.

Zimbabwe's Pilot District Support Project (PDSP)[7] emerged from a combination of the experiences and interests of two sets of actors, one internal and one external. The internal actors were a small but significant group of Zimbabwean administrators and planners, who had been trying to implement the government's policy of

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[6] There was a similar but independent Danida supported initiative in Uganda around the same time.

[7] The following account is based primarily on personal experience. However, for further information see DIP 2002.

"bottom up" planning but were frustrated by the fact that all government funding was centralised and departmentalised. The external actors were regional DFID personnel, who had learned lessons from their pilot local government support project in Zambia and were keen to see whether the approach could be transferred to Zimbabwe. The process of design and approval took three years (1986-89). During this period much time and effort was spent in creating a project tailor-made for Zimbabwe and in gaining the support and commitment of the various national and local institutions that would be involved. The pilot district (Gokwe) was carefully chosen to ensure a favourable project environment and representatives from the district were fully involved in the design process.

Four individuals were instrumental in the design process: the provincial administrator of the province in which the pilot district was located, who had been one of the earliest advocates of the project; the provincial planner of that province, who was transferred to the national level during the design process and thus able to engineer the necessary support at national level; the DFID's Zimbabwe representative, who was fully committed to the project and had an excellent understanding of the Zimbabwean environment; and a former technical cooperation officer (TCO) in the Zambian project, who assisted in the detailed design. Equally important was the process of selecting technical assistance personnel. Although DFID was at that time moving from direct employment of TCOs to contracting out project implementation, the representative in Harare was able to persuade them that this was a special case. The TCO from the Zambian project agreed to be the team leader and the other two TCOs were handpicked, primarily on the basis of their facilitation skills.

PDSP operated as a pilot project for six years (1989-95). During this time, it was generally acknowledged to be a success. Activities were extended to a second district and the increased capacity to plan and implement development programmes in both districts was so impressive that both central government officials and other donors were convinced that the approach should be extended to other parts of the country. Thus, in 1994, the process of designing a nationwide local government support programme began. However, this process turned out to be very different from the design of PDSP. Because of the scale of the programme, there had to be many more procedural rules and regulations, more vested interests at the national level had to be accommodated, and in order to raise the amount of funds required many more donors had to be involved –including the World Bank–. The Bank's involvement was particularly significant because, subtly

but indisputably, it took over control of the programme and, in so doing, undermined the essential prerequisites of local ownership and a process approach. It insisted that its own design and implementation procedures be followed (including the establishment of a special implementation unit), forced the government to agree to complementary decentralisation reforms, and pushed the whole process along at such speed that many of the Zimbabweans involved were left behind. There were also problems in negotiating the DFID-supported component of the programme, which involved the provision of technical assistance. The environment in DFID had changed significantly: there was no longer a national DFID office; regional staff lacked an in-depth understanding of either the Zimbabwean environment or the rationale behind the PDSP approach; and both design and implementation were contracted out to private consultants.

The Rural District Councils Capacity-Building Programme (RDCCBP), as it was called, operated for five years (1996-2001). There was no independent evaluation of the programme. However, most people would probably agree that its achievements were less impressive than those of PDSP, with significant improvements in capacity occurring in only about a third of districts. Problems included inadequate high-level political support, insufficient understanding and/or commitment among the leadership of some districts, the difficulty of finding local technical assistance personnel with good facilitation skills, the relative inflexibility of operational procedures, and tensions between permanent government employees, Zimbabwean technical assistance personnel (who were employed by the government on short-term contracts at inflated salaries), and expatriate technical assistance staff. Meanwhile, progress in the original pilot district, Gokwe, took a turn for the worse. A combination of changes in political and administrative leadership within the council, the complex interplay of national and district politics at the district level, and the withdrawal of a full-time district facilitator demonstrated that the process of capacity building at this level is much longer and more difficult to sustain than the initial PDSP experience had suggested.

Zimbabwe's local government capacity building efforts ground to a premature halt in 2001, when the country's political instability and its failure to meet international debt obligations resulted in the withdrawal of most international aid. Since then, the combination of political and economic decline has hit local government councils hard and most of the direct benefits of the capacity building efforts have been lost. However, the picture is not totally negative. There are some councils that are now led by former facilitators and are managing to func-

tion in this hostile environment, using principles learned from RDCCBP. Moreover, many of the individuals involved in the programme, both Zimbabwean and expatriate, gained valuable experience that they are now using in other situations.

3.3. The community level

Community-level development is a vast field with an enormous professional literature of its own, a review of which is beyond the scope of this paper. Most externally-supported community level initiatives are individual projects. They vary greatly in aims, focus and methods, and are supported by an equally wide variety of donors, the majority of which tend to be NGOs. However, there have also been some attempts to replicate such experiences on a wider scale. These include the European Union's microprojects programmes, the World Bank's social funds and UNDP's decentralised cooperation programme. Another, more recent and very different attempt is being pioneered by a South African-based NGO called the African Institute for Community-Driven Development (formerly Khanya), which is undertaking pilot studies in several Southern African countries with financial support from DFID (Khanya 2003; Goldman 2005). Rather than try to summarise the lessons that can be learned from these diverse experiences, I will describe one project, located in the Binga District of Zimbabwe, which demonstrates very clearly both the potential and the limitations of providing external support to such initiatives, and also the link between district and community level capacity development.[8]

Binga is one of Zimbabwe's poorest and most remote districts. The people of Binga belong to the minority Tonga ethnic group, whose lives were disrupted in the 1950s by the construction of the Kariba Dam. The project was initiated in 1996 by a local community activist under the auspices of the local Catholic Church and the Zimbabwe Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace (CCJP). It was officially called the Binga Human Rights and Development Project but usually known simply as Binga CCJP. Its main role was to help village-level communities to understand their human and civic rights, analyse the reasons for their deprivation, and organise themselves to address the problems thus identified. However, in 1999 it extended its activities to include the provision of small amounts of money and technical assistance for local development projects identified by communities through the above process. It began on a very small scale with one full-time mem-

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[8] The following description is again based primarily on my own experience, as a part-time technical adviser to the project. For more details of the project, see Conyers and Cumanzala 2004.

ber of staff (the initiator) and a team of community-based volunteers, but gradually expanded until at its peak it was employing nearly 40 people. It was funded initially by Catholic Relief Services (CRS), a US-based Catholic organisation, and later also by CRS's British counterpart, CAFOD, and the Danish volunteer organisation, MS.

Binga CCJP was in all respects a locally driven initiative. Its approach to community mobilisation, which was the foundation of its activities, was developed locally through a process of learning-by-doing. All its employees were Binga people, recruited and trained locally.[9] And even when the scale of its operations and thus also of its external support increased significantly, the donors did no more than provide funding and give guidance when requested. They did not try to influence the extent or direction of the organisation's expansion or the content of its programmes. Moreover, they made relatively few demands in terms of project management; they were flexible in their approach and, in line with CCJP's participatory philosophy, encouraged the use of participatory methods of project design, monitoring and evaluation.

For reasons that will be explained later, Binga CCJP only operated for six years. However, during this time it achieved a remarkably high degree of success (Conyers and Cumanzala 2004). Two of its achievements are particularly significant. Firstly, it succeeded in developing an effective system of participatory, "bottom-up" planning and in demonstrating that local communities can identify and prioritise their needs and, with a limited amount of technical assistance, plan appropriate interventions to address these needs. It so happened that the height of CCJP's activity coincided with the provision of increased development funding to the district, both through the RDCCBP described above and through a World Bank funded Community Action Programme.[10] CCJP's activities complemented these programmes, demonstrating very clearly that, in order to maximise the benefits of decentralising financial resources, there must be effective systems of planning at community as well as district level.

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[9] The only exceptions were myself, a part-time technical adviser already resident in the area, and a Danish volunteer funded by MS. Neither of us was involved in the formative stages of the organisation or played any role in policy-making.

[10] The Community Action Programme was based on the conventional social fund model but, influenced by the experience of PDSP and RDCCBP, it operated through local councils.

The other significant achievement was an increase in civic awareness and thus in the process of "democratisation" within the district. In Binga, unlike most parts of rural Zimbabwe, the people have had both the political awareness and the courage to stand up against the Mugabe government. In the constitutional referendum of 2000, the parliamentary elections of 2000 and 2005, the presidential elections of 2002, and the local government elections of 2002, Binga people have repeatedly voted against the government. It is not possible in this paper to discuss all the reasons for this. However, there is a strong case to suggest that, although CCJP deliberately disassociated itself from party politics, its conscientisation and civic education activities played a role (Conyers and Cumanzala 2004). CCJP also had an important impact on local democracy. Its community groups made various attempts to hold the District Council to account and several members of these groups have since become councillors themselves. In other words, CCJP has demonstrated that strong community-based organisations can increase the accountability of local government institutions and reduce the risk of elite capture.

However, CCJP's achievements were also the cause of its downfall. In October 2002 it was forced to close. The decision to close it was made by the local Catholic diocese, in response to increasing pressure from national and local politicians, who accused CCJP of helping to generate opposition to the government in the district. Its case was not helped by the fact that its success in mobilising people and attempting to address their needs had aroused jealousy in both the District Council and the Church. The history of Binga CCJP thus demonstrates all too clearly the fact that democratisation in Zimbabwe, as in Africa as a whole, is a long and often painful process.

There has been no attempt to reproduce the CCJP approach elsewhere. However, it is fairly obvious from the above overview that any such attempt would be difficult. The main strengths of the organisation are things that would be difficult to reproduce elsewhere: its initiation in Binga by Binga people; its appropriateness to the local environment; the adoption of a learning-by-doing approach; and the qualities of its leadership. Of particular significance, perhaps, is the fact that it was not consciously established as part of a more comprehensive decentralised development project. There is no doubt that its community-based planning system enhanced the decentralisation of financial and planning functions to the district level. But this does not mean that such a system could have been created "on demand" by district or national level authorities and certainly not by donors.

In fact, it was CCJP's independence from national and district level authorities that enabled it to stand up against them.

3.3. Conclusions

Five main conclusions emerge from the above analysis:

1. The basic approach to MDG localisation based on local ownership an local prioritisation by local actors is conceptually sound and there is already a vast amount of relevant experience from which to learn.

2. However, one must not expect such an approach to have dramatic or immediate impacts in terms of the achievement of the MDG goals, since one must first develop the necessary institutional capacity, and this is a long, slow process with numerous pitfalls.

3. The most successful donor-supported projects are those in which:

   • The project is initiated and managed locally, with minimal donor input other than finance;

   • The mode of intervention is designed specifically to meet local needs and conditions rather than based on some external model;

   • The donor understands and is sensitive to the local environment and adopts a flexible, "process" approach to project design and management; and.

   • There is a favourable policy environment.

4. Such projects are, by their nature, very difficult to "scale-up" or reproduce elsewhere; only the basic principles (local ownership, local design, and a process approach) can be transferred.

5. Attempts to scale-up or replicate them are very easily "captured" by donors who either do not appreciate the importance of these basic principles or, more often, lack the capacity and/or "political will" to adopt them.

4. Closing remarks

Unfortunately, the above conclusions require an approach to aid that most donors, especially the larger bilateral and multilateral ones, are unable or unwilling to adopt. They require far more radical changes than those in the Paris

Declaration on Aid Effectiveness, which (for reasons given in section 2.2) are in any case unlikely to be met. Moreover, they could well result in a demand for less rather than more aid, or at least for aid to be disbursed much more slowly, without any attempt to meet specific targets. The basic problem, as already indicated in section 2.2, is that "development" has become an industry, driven by aid agencies who are motivated by factors other than concern for Africa's poor and have vested interests in maintaining the *status quo*. In fact, one could argue that, in order to make poverty in Africa history, the first step should be to make development history; in other words, to abolish the development industry and relegate "development" to its proper place as part of history.

Putting aside such utopian thinking, I would like to make three suggestions:

1. The approach to MDG localisation based on local ownership an local prioritisation by local actors should be presented not as a "model", but as a set of guiding principles.

2. The approach should not be "marketed" as such, but promoted by encouraging and facilitating the exchange of experience between relevant organisations and individuals at national, district and community level. This exchange of experience can take many forms, including conferences, comparative research like that undertaken by MDP in other fields of local governance, and –perhaps most important of all– exchange visits by those directly involved.

3. The implications for donor practice (i.e. the need for genuine local ownership, locally relevant interventions and a process approach to project management) should be constantly emphasised by every means possible. Those participants with direct influence over major donor agencies should make a concerted effort to argue the case –in much the same way as those promoting the MDGs have argued theirs–. UNDP has a particularly important role in this respect. And those of us without such direct influence should just keep hammering the point whenever we get a chance: that is why I seized the opportunity to present a paper at this conference!

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