



## The Political Strategy of the External Aid

By Javier Schunk<sup>1</sup>

When creating a process of international aid, the definition of a political strategy is critically important. But what does that mean exactly?

Let us suppose that international aid should bridge the existing gap between a government and its own population. (In fact, a government which is able to deliver to its own population services and goods and to guarantee participation to the decisions maybe does not call for international cooperation aid.) International co-operation could cover such incapacity, inefficiency, lack of care, lack of resources, lack of knowledge, etc., of those governments. But in any case international aid should merely supporting such a government to do their duty. What happens when those governments, due to many reasons, doesn't want to do their duty? Or, what could be the correct approach in those countries where the government is a dictatorial regime (military, theocratic and sometimes even elected into power!) and where this regime oppresses its own population or is in open conflict with a part of it? Is working in partnership with those governments the best political strategy in order to aid those populations? Or maybe it is more

correct, for example, to work at the grass-root level in order to create a counter-power and thereby making a real contribution in terms of democracy?

Even in the case of governments legitimated by elections, which really represent the interests of the population, can centralised international aid actually reach any corner of the country? Who decides where, why and to whom the aid will be delivered? Do poor countries have the means and capacity to deliver centralised external aid to places 800 or more km away from their capital? It is obvious that a country needs a national government and we cannot by-passing it every time we look for the best result. The international aid has to push - wherever that is possible and fair - the national government in order to guarantee balance, equity, solidarity, cohesion and cooperation throughout the entire national territory. Big projects with a national impact must be run at national level. In terms of impact, they have a huge capacity to create important changes. Unfortunately, big agencies in charge of this kind of cooperation are themselves slow bureaucracies and in many cases. This approach started to be very popular during the 60's when many developing countries obtained their independence and northern donors' beliefs was that supporting those governments is the only way to create development. It also proved to be the easier way to maintain a partnership (and control) with the new governments.

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In the 80s, decentralized government was expected to reduce some of the limits we mentioned describing the co-operation with centralised governments. However, both in northern and southern countries de-locating power means not only to increase the responsibilities of local government structures. It implies to de-locate resources. But also at local level, can we assume that the decentralised government really represents the interests of the population? Once again, the answer is not always affirmative. Trying to capacitate the local authorities could definitely be a good political strategy and today many decentralised government donors in the north (the co-operation with communities, cities, regions, etc) are involved in this approach.

To avoid disadvantages of the centralized and decentralized approach donor organisations try to positioning at the “neutral” intermediate level - between government and population. They support creating round tables of the local stakeholders to link them and establish real local governance<sup>2</sup>. This original approach<sup>3</sup> was proposed as the most sustainable way to create local development and enhance the civil dialogue<sup>4</sup>. Many UN agencies, decentralised northern donors and NGOs have followed this political strategy during the last 10 years. Type, size and impact of these projects are more or less the same as the decentralised approach. But, what happens when the “deciders” around the table do not represent the whole network of the local society? When it is hard to find the leaders who really represent the population? Then, who represents whom? The population could be represented by political parties, ethnical groups, family clans, religious leaders, sector working body, trade unions, grass root associations, etc. There is a kind of “Babel” of local representation.

In a project in Burundi, it was decided to asphalt a national road. This choice was an action decided by the national level in function of the national interest. We had supported the centralised government to do it. But in the specific primary path of the road and its secondary axes we supported the local level's decisions including obviously the population's representatives in order to respect the local traditions and, for example, follow the traditional cycled paths and avoiding that the roads cross their sacred wood!

Supporting directly the population by projects is sometimes necessary in order to create better conditions of life. Politically, it allows enhancing the level of participation of a large part of the population and therefore local empowerment<sup>5</sup>. Creating and supporting grass roots associations at their different levels means to put a brick on the democracy wall. This is the classic bottom-up political strategy carried on during the last 45 years by NGOs, leftist inspired agencies (trade unions, students associations, etc) and priests. The size and impact of these projects is generally limited. Such projects can however be test experiences, a kind of experimental laboratory.

The choice of a political strategy depends on manifold reasons: the nature of the external actor: his interest and aims and the dimension of the external aid; the general local contexts: the local stakeholders and their relationship and how power is shared by the stakeholders; etc. With regard to those elements, an external operator should define the own political strategy to be applied before deciding the technical project to be carried out. That's “the project before the project”.

In the following grid<sup>6</sup>, (see next side) we propose five kinds of general political strategies. Each one with a short description, indication of who has the power and who is in charge of taking decisions:

<sup>2</sup> We commonly refer to the term “governance” when the central State is only one of the local actors who hold the power.

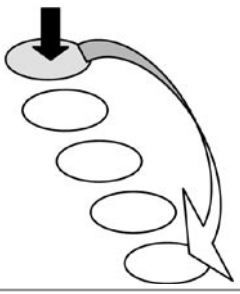
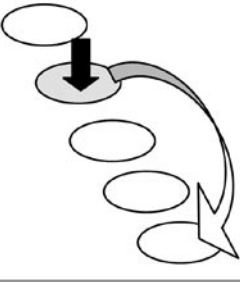
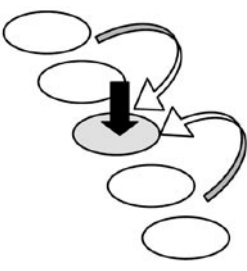
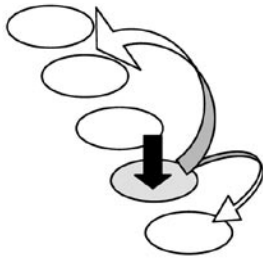
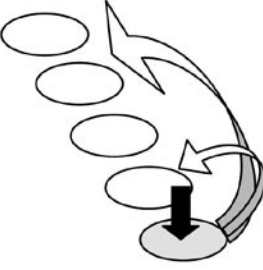
<sup>3</sup> The “neutral approach” was introduced in the middle of the 90's, during the UN's meeting in Copenhagen.

<sup>4</sup> In opposition to the social dialogue that proposes the participation of the governments, chief of enterprises and trade unions, the civil dialogue enlarges this participation to all local stakeholders.

<sup>5</sup> “Process that foster the population to find and define their lives and the kind of society where they want to live. In other words, it means to enable people to organise and to influence their access to the knowledge, the political, financial, and social processes and the natural resources management” (Thomas-Slayter)

<sup>6</sup> *Il progetto prima del progetto, tattiche e strategie applicate all'aiuto allo sviluppo*, Javier Schunk, 2001, Ed. Harmattan.

## General political strategies:

<i>Approach</i>	<i>Scheme</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Power and decisions</i>	<i>Example</i>
<i>Top-down</i>		<i>Supporting the centralised state in its role of supporting the population</i> <b>(Government)</b>	<i>Central state</i>	<i>Loan of the International monetary fund</i>
<i>Decentralised downward</i>		<i>Supporting the decentralised state in its role of supporting the population</i> <b>(Decentralisation)</b>	<i>Decentralised state</i>	<i>Co-operation between decentralised structures of different countries</i>
<i>Decentralised neutral</i>		<i>Creating the link between state and population. Enhance the civil society</i> <b>(Governance)</b>	<i>Local, whole civil society</i>	<i>Local agencies of development</i>
<i>Decentralised upward</i>		<i>Supporting the populations representatives and NGO's in the transfer of power to the population</i> <b>(Empowerment)</b>	<i>Structure that represents the population</i>	<i>Enhance the peasants organisations in order to permit them to share the power with the state assuring the representativeness of the grass root</i>
<i>Bottom-up</i>		<i>Supporting directly the grass root in the rise of the power</i> <b>(Empowerment)</b>	<i>Population</i>	<i>Supporting population delivering goods and services. Creation of a representative structure and find the state support</i>

Bi-lateral and multi-lateral co-operation used to have a classic “top-down” approach. Though they only recently start to include the “decentralised downward” one too. Anyway, their natural partner is the Government. The northern decentralised co-operation generally has a “decentralised downward” approach where local administration is its natural partner. “Decentralised neutral” approach is more and more the strategy adopted by bilateral and multi-bilateral agencies which identify the local round tables of stakeholders as their partner. NGOs used to prefer the “bottom-up” approach while recently they experienced also the “decentralised upward” one. Natural partner, in these cases, are grass roots organisations and locals NGOs.

Therefore, we can assume that the partnership depends on the type of political strategy we will decide to choose. The political strategy is composed by a general political strategy, a specific political strategy and a political tactic. The definition of the political strategy starts with the identification of one of the five models shown in the grid above and is implemented by the specific political strategy which means the local application of the general one.

### The specific political strategy

Types of specific political strategy	Description	Example
Country	Creation or support to a national structure	An international aid agency has supported in Brazil the local structure called MST (Movimento Sem Terra) in its role of representation of the peasants without land in front of the National government.
Region	Creation or support to a regional structure	In Mali, many different projects implemented irrigated rice crops beside the Niger river without connections between them. A further project proposed to integrate the management committees in order to create a second level structure able to manage input and output for all peasants of the region and at the same time to enhance the organisational structure in order to bring them the necessary capacity of negotiation with the local authorities in delivering inputs, reducing taxes, supporting commercialisation, etc.
Zone	Creation or support to an organisation into a village	In Senegal, the realisation of mill machines was aimed to enhance the women role and to create economic independence from their husbands.

### The specific political strategy

The application of the general political strategy at a territorial level effects the specific political strategy. We could consider three levels: country, region and zone.

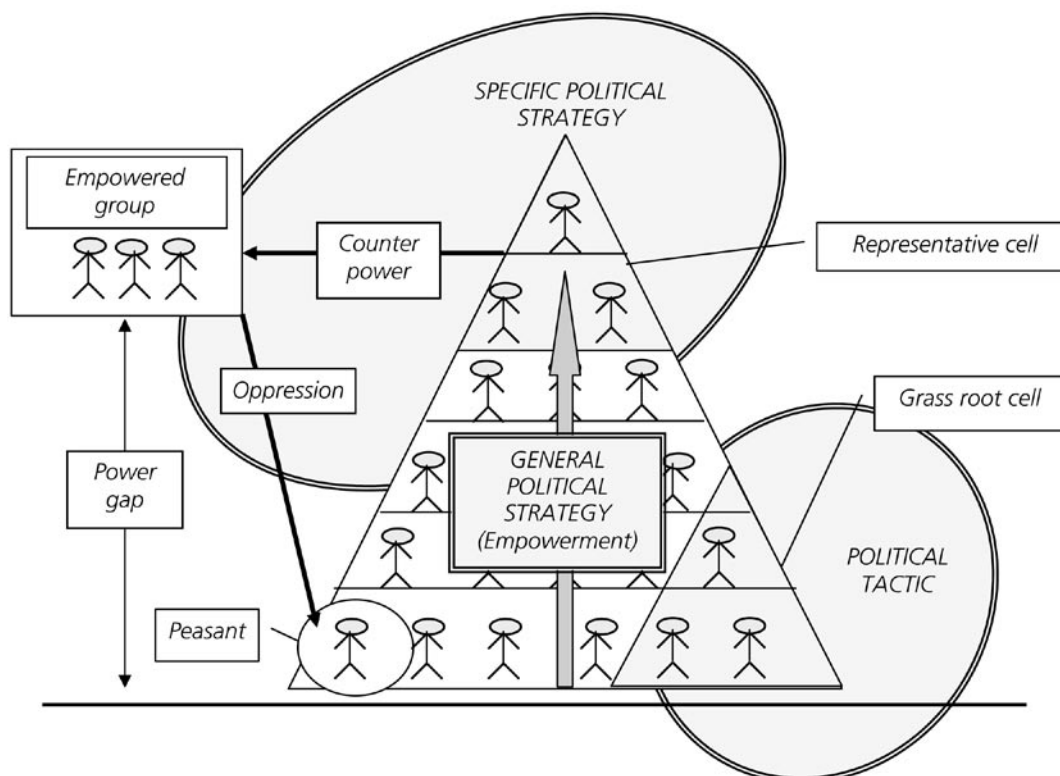
### The political tactic and the “political puzzle”

The following example completes the political strategy analysis and represents the relationship between strategy and tactic. It could help in understanding how to build the “political puzzle”.

The example applied the “bottom-up” general political strategy and described how an external aid agency supported a local partner with several projects through a technical programme with a political strategy.

The specific political analysis consisted in drawing the local stakeholders map defining the less powered actors and supporting them in order to reduce the power gap. This means generating conflict. Development implies also to change the local network of power and creating

## “The political puzzle”



a new state of dynamic balance. It is the well-known “empowerment”: the idea generated in Latin America during the 60’s in the religious field with the “Theology of liberation” of L. Boff and G. Gutierrez, supported by P. Freire in his book “The pedagogy of oppressed” and a few years later by R. Chambers in his “putting the last first”.

In the scheme above the local powered stakeholders are placed higher in relation to the peasants. It represents the power gap between them while the downward arrow means their oppression over the peasants.

We can see how the power gap was filled by the creation and linking of grass root cells until a peasant’s organisation could be created, represented by the pyramid. Through the empowerment process, the higher representative cell was placed at the same level of the powered group. In this way, the negative influence over the peasants was neutralised.

As shown, the political strategy could be imagined as a “political puzzle”: the final political objective is

the reduction of the peasant’s oppression; the **general political strategy** was to support the grass root empowerment; the **specific political strategy** consisted in transfer of power to the peasant by the creation of a representative cell in order to create a local counter power able to cope with the powered group and then to resist the oppression due to the power gap. The **political tactic** was the creation, systematic support and link of the peasant grass roots.

In a Central-African country, we find individual peasants isolated in the hills without capacity to produce what they need and forgotten by the local government, with no capacity to gain access to the public services, dependent on the fertiliser controlled by the rich local traders. After 15 years and five generations of development projects a third level organisation of peasants was created. Today it represents more than 3000 families and they are able to: sell and import fertilisers, contract loans with local banks, sell to other regions the surplus of beans produced, negotiate local development plans with the governments, be partners of the international development agencies, etc. Last but not least, the president of the whole federation is a woman!