U.S. civil society promotion and the construction democratic governance in the Dominican Republic

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the contradictions underlying USAID's role in the consolidation of an advocacy-oriented civil society in the Dominican Republic since the 1990s. I discuss how USAID defined this polysemic concept and describe who, in terms of socio-economic characteristics and political interests, it promoted as representatives of civil society. I also examine the intersection of USAID's programming with long-standing local efforts to develop civil society's organizational capacity and political influence. I identify the issues and principles shared by USAID and local Dominican actors and establish the positive synergy produced through their cooperation. Yet, I also expose areas of tensions between USAID and certain sectors of the island's civil society. These tensions reveal the complex issues of power shaping the relation between international aid and political change in the D.R. They also reveal alternative local models of democracy and civil society to those pursued by USAID. Ultimately, my inquiry questions some of USAID's claims about its contribution to the strengthening of civil society and the consolidation of a locally-responsive democratic system in the D.R.

Introduction

Today's civil society is not the same and I think that the PID was one of the fundamental reasons…Civil society learned that which the gringos call empowerment...

Ex- Director of the USAID sponsored Democratic Initiatives Project (PID), Interview

The U.S. promotes a representative democracy, eh, where the institutions work so that the market can work and we aspire to a participatory democracy in which the participation of society guarantees social equity and a sustainable economic development so that the population can rise out of poverty, so that the cultural and spiritual level of the Dominican people is elevated.

Program coordinator, Centro de Estudios Juan Montalvo, Interview

Like many other developing countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Dominican Republic (D.R.) has been struggling for decades, if not centuries, to consolidate a democratic system of governance (Hartlyn 1998). In the mid-1990s, these struggles seemed finally to be paying off as the Dominican political scenario witnessed a significant turn around. By all accounts the 1996 elections were free of fraud and the union and working-class led social unrests and protests of previous decades were slowly giving way to an advocacy-oriented civil society (Centro de Estudios Sociales Padres Juan Montalvo S.J 2001; Hartlyn 1998; PNUD 2005). The emergence of this advocacy-oriented civil society is of special note given the historical absence in the D.R. of open spaces for citizens to articulate demands and participate in public affairs. During the 1990s civil society organizations changed the manner

in which Dominicans organized and articulated their demands and played a key role in proposing and implementing reforms that strengthened democracy in the island. In the twenty-first century, civil society has continued to consolidate its presence, becoming a key actor in the struggle to achieve a still elusive participatory, democratic form of governance in the D.R.

Without question, the prominence achieved by civil society reflects the growing success of Dominican intellectuals, businessmen, NGOs, and social movements in their struggle to overcome the political exclusion, institutionalized corruption and economic crises that historically have plagued the D.R. (Centro de Estudios Sociales Padres Juan Montalvo S.J 2001; Espinal 1995; Hartlyn 1993; Spanakos, A. P. and Wiarda, H. J. 2003). However, like most developing countries, the Dominican Republic has had to contend with the active involvement of bilateral and multilateral international organizations in the island's social, political and economic affairs (Black 1986). In the last few decades, the international community has played an important role in the ongoing process of democratic reforms, including the promotion of civil society. Thus, like so many other of the island's political and economic spaces and institutions, civil society consists of an eclectic combination of local and international initiatives.

As the first opening quote suggest, the United States, through its Agency for International Development (USAID), has been one of the most salient international actors involved in democratic reforms in the D.R., especially civil society promotion. USAID's contribution to the consolidation of democracy in general and civil society in particular in the '90s has been positively assessed by numerous observers. The above quoted opinion of a former director of the USAID sponsored Democratic Initiatives Project (PID) is echoed in numerous evaluation reports made of the agency's programs (Checchi & Company Consulting Inc. 2002; Goodin, Lippman 1998; USAID 2002; Memorias de un Camino 2002). Moreover, respected U.S.-based political scientist writing on politics in the D.R. have also recognized the positive impact of U.S. civil society promotion and recommended the continuation of such cooperation (Espinal, R. and Hartlyn, J. 1998; Spanakos, A. P. and Wiarda, H. J. 2003).

Yet, the second quote illustrates that U.S. efforts have been the subject of some criticism by local Dominican actors. Members of progressive civil society organizations and state officials actively involved in political reform efforts (some even with USAID projects) have expressed deep dissatisfaction with U.S. democracy promotion efforts. As the quote suggests, their complaints are directed towards the limitations imposed by USAID's vision of democracy and the kind of projects they carry out in the D.R. Thus, their critique voices a progressive frustration with the kinds of political changes being promoted and the manner in which they are promoted by AID.

This essay analyzes the contradictions underlying USAID's role in the consolidation of this advocacy-oriented civil society since the 1990s. Following a brief historical account of citizen activism in the D.R., I analyze USAID's civil society programming. I discuss how it defined this polysemic concept and describe who, in terms of socio-economic characteristics and political interests, USAID promoted as representatives of civil society. I also examine the intersection of USAID's programming with local efforts to develop civil society's political influence. I identify the issues and principles shared by USAID and local Dominican actors and establish the positive synergy produced through their cooperation. Yet, I also expose areas of tensions between USAID and certain sectors of the island's civil society. These tensions reveal the complex issues of power shaping the relation between international aid and political change in the D.R. They also reveal alternative local models of democracy and civil society to those pursued by USAID. Ultimately, my inquiry questions some of USAID's

claims about its contribution to the strengthening of civil society and the consolidation of a locally-responsive democratic system in the D.R.

Tracing Civil Society in the D.R.: From old struggles to the new momentum of the '90s

Civil society, as a concept, flooded the Dominican popular imagination in the 1990s. Yet, the existence of an associational realm independent of the state and the private sector in which Dominicans organized voluntarily to voice their discontent with entrenched authoritarian regimes and demand participation in public affairs is certainly not a phenomenon of the 1990s. In fact, Dominican history evidences a long and heroic trajectory of anti-authoritarian and social justice struggles.

Tracing the existence of nongovernmental spheres of action in the D.R. is challenging given the country's highly repressive political history. During the twentieth century, the D.R. endured Rafael Trujillo's thirty year dictatorship (1930-1961) and Joaquin Balaguer's authoritarian control of state power spanning three decades (1966-1978, 1986-1996). The regimes of both Trujillo and Balaguer were notoriously devoid of legal frameworks that could guarantee the minimal political and civil rights necessary for civil society to exist and act (Toribio 2001, 97). With the possible exception of Balaguer's final tenure as President (1986-1996), both leaders imposed their disdain for organized citizen participation in public affairs through the persecution and murder of thousands of dissidents, particularly from leftists' movements demanding accountability from their government officials and advocating for change.

Despite its high cost, Dominicans did organize and sustain important social, cultural and religious movements and organizations under both Trujillo and Balaguer. Devoid of legally guaranteed spaces for voicing their discontent and participating in public affairs, Dominicans developed other spaces that were less overt.[1] Peasant movements, Base Christian Communities, cultural and sports clubs, and NGOs founded by leftist parties all served as important sites of oppositional activism and consciousness-raising. Cultural and religious groups are of special note since Dominicans met not only for poetry and prayer, but also to discuss and delineate alternative political projects. Yet, while citizens wrestled away civic and political spaces of resistance from both Trujillo's and Balaguer's authoritarian regimes, the political and human cost of this activism severely undermined the consolidation of an independent civil society. Simply stated, civil society could not flourish in a context in which it struggles to survive.

The 1978 election of Antonio Guzman of the Dominican Revolutionary Party (PRD) as president not only ended Balaguer's twelve year authoritarian tenure, but also marked a turning point in the history of civil society in the D.R. Guzman's presidency offered the promise of a democratic opening to political dissidence and a commitment to constitutional guarantees of political and civil rights (Hartlyn 1998). The PRD's reforms inaugurated an era in which the Dominican state would provide citizens the minimal guarantees necessary for civil society to assume a key role in the renewed national commitment to democratic reform. While Guzman and subsequent PRD administrations in the 1980s were plagued by political and economic problems that limited their reformist agenda, the political opening they offered proved to be irreversible.

Besides renewed political and civil rights, the 1980s also witnessed the increased presence of the *cooperación internacional* in the D.R. Motivated in large part by the arrival of neoliberal reforms to the island, bilateral and multilateral institutions diverted significant financial resources to non-state actors for a variety of purposes: from the delivery of social services to the promotion of democratic reforms, including the strengthening of civil society organizations. The availability of this funding led to the proliferation of NGOs, a proliferation that offered Dominican activists the opportunity to develop important organizational and

practical experiences relevant to the formation and consolidation of nongovernmental spaces of action. Thus, the confluence in the '80s of national and international political and economic changes fostered the emergence of NGOs as key vehicles through which citizens could channel their various social demands to both the Dominican state and the international community.

During the early '90s the D.R. lived a seemingly unending political crisis that provided the context for the emergence of a concerted response from civil society. Although the D.R. has been considered a democracy since 1978, the 1990 and 1994 elections betrayed the tenuous nature of that characterization. The widely acknowledged frauds perpetuated by Balaguer in these elections revealed not only his disregard for the will of the Dominican electorate, but, more importantly, the vulnerability of state institutions, such as the Electoral Board, to political corruption and the virtual exclusion of organized citizen groups from that decision-making process (Wilson 1997). The electoral crises of 1990 and 1994 highlighted the persistence of numerous problems that have hampered Dominican politics for decades: authoritarian and corrupt leaders, exclusive control of political activity by political parties and the absence of spaces for organized citizen involvement.

In response to the crises, a number of citizen organizations emerged denouncing their frustrations with the persistent neopatrimonial system of governance and demanding democratic political changes. Organizations like Testimonio, 30 de Mayo, Acción Pro Patria and Comité de Apoyo a la Institutionalidad began establishing a proactive role for civil society in the 1990s elections by participating in the certification process of voter acts and submitting a final report to the Central Electoral Commission (Participación Cuidadana 2004, 27). Since that election, a number of organizations, such as Participación Ciudadana (P.C.), have played crucial roles in securing the transparency and legitimacy of the electoral process. Since 1996, these organizations have extended their work beyond the electoral process to the promotion of political reforms to deepen democratic governance, increase citizen participation in political life, and reduce administrative corruption in the government.

Today, these organizations constitute a citizen movement committed to undoing the legacies of the autocratic past that still plagues the D.R.'s political system. The space of civil society in the 1990s is defined by the existence of a citizenry interested in participating in the reformation of the political system from outside the traditional state and party structure. This citizenry has no interest in governing; instead they seek to ensure that state officials govern in accordance with democratic principles. Moreover, civil society organizations have questioned the exclusive hold over political issues held by political parties. The electoral frauds of 1990 and 1994, along with the numerous Pacts through which Balaguer and opposition parties negotiated the solution to each crisis, emphasized the historical disempowerment of Dominican citizens. Thus, the deployment of the concept of civil society by these organizations served to legitimate the existence and relevance of a third space—outside government and political parties—from which political demands and proposals could be made.

Although this 1990s civil society emerged in response to local conditions and through local efforts, the international community soon took note of it and provided important financial and technical support to help strengthen and consolidate it. The assistance of the international community, especially the United States, would have a significant impact on the development and vigor of civil society in the D.R.

USAID's Civil Society Promotion in the D.R.

Although traditionally an agency dealing with economic and social development, USAID was charged in the early 1990s with managing the U.S.'s democracy assistance programs worldwide (Carothers 1999, 39). By 1994 the agency had established a Democracy

and Governance Center which would coordinate the agency's Democracy Initiative (Adams 2000, 99). From its inception, USAID's Democracy Initiative program focused on four major broad policy goals: developing competitive electoral systems, defending the rule of law and human rights, promoting greater accountability and transparency in government affairs, and strengthening civil society (ibid.). This last component is especially interesting because, unlike the others, civil society would be treated simultaneously as both the subject and the source of projects of democratic reforms. In other words, civil society was identified by USAID as an important area of technical and financial investment as well as a key site from which demands and proposals seeking to influence democratic reform would surface.

USAID began its Democracy Initiative programming in the D.R. following a visit by James Michael, USAID's Regional Director for Latin America, during the fall of 1991. The agency was charged with developing programs to help consolidate a transparent and reliable electoral system, contend with inefficiencies and corruption in the three branches of government, and expand and legitimize the existence and participation of nongovernmental institutions, i.e. civil society. While USAID pursued all three areas of the agenda, its civil society programming stood out above all others not only because of its widely recognized achievements, but also because of its role in helping the other areas of democratic reform.

The salience of the civil society program responds to the particular socio-political conditions faced by USAID in its early efforts to develop its Democracy Initiative. USAID began its democracy reform project by working directly with the Dominican state. Even before the crises of the 1990-1994 period, USAID had tried to implement a small Rule of Law program with the Dominican Supreme Court, which failed due to the Court's lack of political will to carry things forward.[2] In response to the crisis of the 1990 elections, USAID invested US$2.1 million in technical and financial assistance, mostly to the Dominican Electoral Board, to help improve the 1994 electoral process (Spanakos, A. P. and Wiarda, H. J. 2003, 111). The disillusion with the results of that election confirmed the grave deficiencies plaguing both the Dominican state and political parties and led USAID to give greater emphasis to its civil society promotion program.

Despite its democratizing potential, civil society faced certain challenges associated with the legacies of institutionalized disdain for citizen participation and clientelistic politics. These two legacies have left an indelible mark on the way citizens relate to the state, with enormous consequences for the democratizing potential of civil society. Even with the existence of a strong will among civil society activists, the political arena afforded them few spaces and virtually no recognition to become serious and effective advocates for change. Moreover, patronage has entrenched itself as one of the primary mechanism through which both political parties and public officials interact with the citizenry. At its core, *clientelismo* fosters the formation of a citizenry for whom politics works through gift-giving, favors and loyalty, rather than through the demand and exercise of political and civil rights and responsibilities. C*lientelismo* cripples the foundations of an independent citizenry capable of advocating for its right and demanding accountability from its governing officials. By distorting the processes through which the guarantees and benefits of democracy for citizens are actualized, *clientelismo* hinders the consolidation of an effective and reliable civil society in the D.R.

The potential of civil society as well as its challenges were incorporated into USAID's civil society programming, which developed two main areas of work: the promotion of civic education and civil society's engagement in reform activities. The former made civil society the subject of democratic reform, while the latter relied on civil society as the source of reforms in other institutional areas, such as elections and good governance. USAID's civic education program began in 1992 through the *Democratic Initiatives Project* (PID in Spanish), the agency's flagship project and its longest lasting and most respected. USAID's

latter program began in 1995 through its *Strengthening Civil Society* initiative, which financed civil society organizations to monitor elections and foster citizen participation in the formulation of a national reform agenda (Checchi & Company Consulting, Inc. 2002; Goodin, Lippman 1998).

The PID

Established in 1992 through the signing of a ten year, US$9.7 million cooperative agreement with Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra (PUCMM), the PID consisted of a Consultative Council that reviewed proposals from community groups, NGOs and professional groups interested in promoting "a more dynamic democratic culture, facilitate and encourage citizen involvement in the political process, and enhance[ing] government efficiency and impartiality" (Goodin, Lippman 1998, 3-4). Proposals deemed promising would be accepted and offered technical and financial assistance to ensure project success. During the ten year duration of the project (1992-2002), the PID successfully sponsored a total of 203 projects, 66 of which focused on decentralization and municipal strengthening, 21 on civic education projects in schools, 20 on gender activities and 19 on the farming sector (Checchi & Company Consulting, Inc. 2002, 27). These projects were spread all over the island: 56 were located in the National District, 93 in the Cibao Region, 31 in the Southern Region and 6 in the Eastern Region (ibid.). In terms of demographics, the projects reached a total of 8,824 direct beneficiaries, two thirds of which were women (ibid.).

While impressive, the numbers do not capture the PID's impact on the success of U.S. civil society promotion assistance in the D.R. The PID was, as one of its former director likes to state, "a Dominican project with AID funds." The project was conceived and implemented in a collaborative manner by both Dominican civil society activists and USAID personnel. The duration, framework and goals of the PID were developed during a nine month period of meetings between USAID personnel and Dominican civil society actors, which included local NGO leaders, lawyers, political scientists, and representatives from professional guilds. The program's project paper was done by Dominicans in Spanish, something previously inconceivable in the agency.[3] Moreover, the PID's Consultative Council consisted almost exclusively of Dominicans of different political orientations and civil society organizations giving them ample control over the review and approval process of project proposals.[4]

The PID also helped renew USAID's strained relationship with social movements in the island. USAID's Cold War baggage, which included involvement in the 1965 U.S. invasion and colluding with Balaguer's authoritarian regime, made many civil society leaders who were invited to collaborate with the project or to submit proposals skeptical of the agency's intentions at the onset. Several initial meetings between USAID staff and local activists had to be held in the house of the agency's sub-director because certain activists refused to set foot in the mission's building.[5] Moreover, a former Director of the PID recalled threatening exchanges and accusations of imperialism in the initial meetings in which she introduced the PID to civil society organizations.

Yet, the collaborative process and project results helped change USAID's image in the eyes of many Dominicans. Neither USAID nor the Consultative Council imposed any ideological constraints on the kinds of projects that could be presented or approved. Instead of ideological monitoring, the PID offered technical and financial supervision to help build the capacity of civil society organizations to run projects and be effective participants in a democratic political system. To be sure, the project director did intervene with a couple of organizations that mismanaged funds and whose internal problems jeopardized their work.[6] Yet, the PID showed USAID's commitment to rely on the work and understanding of local activists for the development of its democratic reform program. USAID understood that the best way to promote a democratic culture in the D.R. was not by imposing a project that

would have little local support, but rather by assisting with its resources the interests and efforts germinating in civil society.

Strengthening Civil Society's Advocacy Role: Participación Ciudadana and FINJUS

The wide variety of groups and projects supported by the PID made it a very unique program given the narrower notion of civil society that USAID would develop worldwide in subsequent years. According to its mission statement, the agency's civil society program is not intended to support civil society 'writ large':

> The DG office makes a distinction between programming which supports civil society writ large, and civil society programming which fits into a democracy strategy. The focus is not how to encourage the growth of civil society organizations for their own good, but how to encourage elements of civil society to play a role in promoting certain kinds of democratic change.[7]

USAID's instrumental notion of civil society has led it to define very narrowly the set of organizations with which it works: "professionalized NGOs dedicated to advocacy or civic education work on public interest issues directly relating to democratization, such as election monitoring, voter education, governmental transparency, and political and civil rights generally" (Carothers, T. and Ottaway, M. 2000, 11). The preference for these kinds of organizations follows a specific U.S. donor logic. First, they work on the kind of political change the U.S. is interested in funding. Second, they resemble "advocacy NGOs in the United States and other established democracies, with designated management, full-time staff, an office, and a charter or statement of mission" (ibid.). In fact, Carothers (1999) argues that USAID's Democracy Initiative transformed U.S. watchdog and lobbying NGOs into the institutional model of civil society which it promoted internationally. Lastly, NGOs are preferred due to their legal and organizational capacity to receive and administer funds from international organizations as well as their ability to deal with their bureaucratic requirements, such as evaluation reports (Carothers, T. and Ottaway, M. 2000, 11).

USAID formally pursued this narrower model of civil society promotion in the D.R. through their Strengthening Civil Society Project (SCS I and II) beginning in 1995. This project had four objectives: Build the capacity of civil society to participate in the 1996 electoral process, train citizens as electoral observers, sponsor an education campaign on voter rights, and foster citizen participation in the development of a national reform agenda (Checchi & Company Consulting, Inc. 2002, 145). While USAID has contracted with American private corporations, such as DPK and Chemonics, the bulk of their civil society program in the D.R. has been carried out by Participación Ciudadana and the Fundación for Institucionalidad y Justicia (FINJUS) (ibid).

Both P.C. and FINJUS are local Dominican NGOs that emerged out of the electoral and institutional crisis of the early 1990s: FINJUS was registered as a nonprofit organization in 1990, while P.C., a citizen's movement founded in 1991, was registered in 1996. P.C. and FINJUS have important overlaps in their mission and vision as organizations: they are committed to the democratic reform of the Dominican state and to the increased presence of civil society in that process. Moreover, both have long history of active participation in political processes: P.C. has made crucial interventions in the electoral process while FINJUS has contributed to judicial reform processes. Lastly, both organizations receive the majority of their funding from international agencies, primarily USAID, although FINJUS also has a private endowment fund (ibid; FINJUS 2005; Participación Ciudadana 2005).

Despite these commonalities, P.C. and FINJUS represent different segments and projects of civil society. P.C. is mostly an organization of middle class professionals and academics who are dissatisfied with the country's persistent political crises and the lack of effective citizen participation. FINJUS was founded by a group of lawyers and entrepreneurs

worried about the country's weak institutions, judirical insecurity and uncertain investment climate. The different cross-sections of class and interests are reflected in each organization's mission statement. P.C.'s mission, for example, expresses a commitment to reforming the political system through active citizen's participation:

> Participación Ciudadana…constitutes itself for the purpose of promoting participation at the heart of civil society and to stimulate the participation of citizen's to accomplish the political, institutional and democratic reforms that the Republic requires and a socially just and equitable development that makes rational and efficient use of resources. [8]

P.C. has pursued this mission by organizing an important network of electoral observers each election and running numerous programs fostering the consolidation of civil society and the education of a responsible citizenry. Programs such as "Civil Society and Political Reform," "Women and Politics," and "Transparency in Public Administration" exemplify the heterogeneous efforts through which P.C. tries to reform the inefficient and corrupt Dominican political system. Lastly, P.C. has an impressive résumé of workshops and published materials geared towards increasing the competency of civil society organization and individual citizens (Participación Ciudadana 2005).

Although also committed to democratic reforms, FINJUS' mission focuses much more on institutional reforms and much less on active citizen participation:

> FINJUS commits itself to contributing to the creation of the foundation for strengthening a democratic institutionality and projecting it in time as an efficient guarantee for the respect of fundamental citizen's rights and the simultaneous generation of a propitious atmosphere for national development based on investment and free enterprise.[9]

FINJUS is widely acknowledged as a key actor proposing and assisting judicial reforms, such as helping to reform the Penal Code, establishing a public defense system, protecting against the illegal trafficking of migrants, and creating links between citizens and the justice system (FINJUS 2005b). Its focus on the judicial branch is strategic since it considers this system the "guardian of the constitution and the guardian of the most profound democratic procedures. It is…the arbiter that can solve social conflicts."[10]

FINJUS's institutional reform agenda is inextricably linked to the juridical and entrepreneurial interests at the core of the organization. Its presidents have all been important Dominican entrepreneurs, while its Executive Directors have been well-regarded jurists. Likewise, its Board of Directors is composed of prominent jurists and entrepreneurs. The focus on institutional reform provides an organic link between entrepreneurs and jurists since securing civil rights and averting arbitrary rule also provide the guarantees necessary to secure the functioning of free markets and local and international investment. Highlighting these interests does not falsify the politico-legal deficiencies singled out by FINJUS or undermine their contribution to the solidification of a more transparent judicial system. But, it does offer a class perspective on the relationship between FINJUS as an organization and the political reforms it promotes.

Despite their differences, P.C. and FINJUS exemplify the kind of progressive, elite civil society organizations favored by USAID. Both organizations work on high profile issues of national interest, such as elections and judicial reform. Their leadership comes from a highly educated and economically solid cross-section of Dominican society. They are professional and experienced institutions with the local standing necessary to carry out effective and efficient advocacy work at a national level. P.C. and FINJUS also share certain ideological principles with USAID. They are reformist organizations that aspire to a well functioning democratic state and a more just distribution within a market economy. Lastly, they both produce concrete empirical critiques and normative proposals for change that can be

readily transformed into technical projects that USAID can fund and execute in a defined period of time.

15 Years of Civil Society Promotion in the D.R.: Perceptions of Its Impact

During the summer of 2005, I interviewed a broad spectrum of political actors involved civil society promotion efforts in the D.R.: USAID personnel, P.C. and FINJUS members, state officials, and other civil society activists. While most acknowledged USAID's role in advancing the process of democratic reform and the consolidation of civil society, some offered incisive critiques of the agency's involvement in this process. The juxtaposition of these diverse and often conflicting perspectives reveals both the positive synergy created by USAID's civil society promotion as well as the troubling dependence and power inequalities it fostered within the space of civil society.

One of the founders of USAID's Democracy and Governance section in the island asserted the agency's invaluable role in promoting both civil society and democracy:

> I think that the day that someone writes the history of the consolidation of democracy from above all, well, starting in '62, but above all from the decade of the 90s s/he will have to acknowledge that AID has been of great importance. [11]

As a key figure in the implementation of USAID's Democracy Initiative in the D.R., he emphasized that the goal of USAID's Democracy Initiative in the D.R. was to advance local efforts and never to "step into the territory of the other." He claimed they understood that civil society was not an export product and that its promotion had to be grounded in the experience and local efforts of Dominicans themselves:

> We had to identify those Dominicans, whether individuals or institutions, that were doing work to democratize the country, what kind of work they were doing, what kind of commitment they had, and then summon and ask them, do you think AID has a role to play? How can we help you? And, you guide us in what we are going to do.

This collaborative approach to civil society promotion sought to instill confidence in USAID and foster the ownership of projects by Dominicans. Yet, this approach was also a strategic move to shield USAID from critiques of sovereignty infringement:

> When you take that into account [USAID's history in the D.R.], you say 'how intelligent it is to work through civil society.' In other words, we give the financial and technical support that is needed within our limitations. The necessities are great, but it is local Dominican institutions that are in the barricades. With that you avoid critiques that this is meddling and this is Yankees Go Home, and you also make an empowerment of the institutions.

This strategy of working through civil society would be known as the *medio paso atras*, or half step back approach, and would reap great benefits for USAID (Checchi & Company Consulting, Inc. 2002; Espinal, R. and Hartlyn, J. 1998; Goodin, Lippman 1998). It allowed USAID to abandon the much maligned political center stage it had occupied for decades while still allow the agency to pursue the U.S.'s foreign policy objectives of promoting democratic change in the D.R. Moreover, this approach helped legitimate USAID's efforts by creating the sense among their Dominican collaborators that these were Dominican initiatives.

USAID's positive contribution to democracy and civil society were acknowledged by those with whom it worked the closest, FINJUS and P.C. A Senior Project Manager from FINJUS expressed a deep support of USAID's intervention on behalf of democracy and civil society promotion:

> I think that [USAID] here in the D.R. has played a very positive role in terms of fomenting more democratic practices and policies. It has strengthened community participation and civil society…For example, its support of electoral observation programs, which it did through P.C., has been a very positive thing. I think that it has

> responded very much to the expectation that its cooperation be committed to processes of broadening democracy. [12]

He maintained that USAID and FINJUS share similar interest in political reform and that the agency did not imposed an agenda or a model of democracy. For him, issues such as transparency and accountability are not American values, but rather necessary public administration principles that ensure responsible behavior from those charged with governing. Moreover, the U.S. did not have to convince Dominicans that the electoral process, judicial branch and public administration needed to be reformed; they knew that better than anyone else. Lastly, he was aware that USAID's promotion of institutional reforms was also geared towards securing U.S. financial investments in the island. Yet, his organization welcomes those reforms because they ultimately benefit not only U.S. investors, but also local investors and consumers.

Leaders from Participación.Ciudadana offered a similar defense of USAID's civil society initiative in the D.R. One of P.C.'s political analyst commended USAID's willingness to follow the lead of local civil society organizations:

> Well, I would give the agency a very positive mark for its performance in the matter of strengthening civil society. From the PID, the systematic support that it has offered P.C., but also other organizations…Something else that needs to be acknowledged is the respect that they have given to the independence of organizations…We say that in this case it is not we who have moved towards AID's positions, but rather that AID has moved to the positions that we have maintained.[13]

For him, the balance of USAID's work in the D.R. has been positive and respectful of the autonomy of local organizations. Likewise, P.C.'s Executive Director affirmed that USAID did not approach them with a pre-defined model of democracy. Instead, common themes and lines of action emerged from USAID's dialogue with civil society organizations. He also stated that USAID's support was not driven by an interest in having local organizations pursue their agenda, but rather is based on the recognition of the work being done by local organization. Lastly, a member of P.C.'s National Council asserted the existence of a confluence of interests between P.C. and USAID: "…personally, we could never say that USAID imposed its agenda on P.C. No, there was a process of synergy: we sought spaces where there was a confluence [of interests]."

Other civil society leaders whose organizations are not funded by USAID also expressed a positive view of the agency's role in the consolidation of civil society. A member of CE-MUJER's technical support team, a feminist NGO, and the former director of the FOSC (Fortalecimiento de las Organizaciones de Sociedad Civil), a civil society promotion initiative financed by the Inter-American Development Bank, both agreed that USAID invested resources in high priority areas, such as developing the institutional capacity of civil society organizations through capacity-building programs and promoting local actor involvement in the process. They also both acknowledged the important work carried out by USAID sponsored organizations, especially Participación Ciudadana. CE-MUJER's technician recognized the importance of international assistance since without it the work of local NGOs would be limited given the insufficiency of local funds. The former director of the FOSC claimed USAID's Strengthening Civil Society Project helped transform the *gobernabilidad* (governance) of the D.R. in such a way that civil society now must be consulted and taken into account in any process of political decision-making.

By contrast, some people did critique USAID's civil society programming. The most common critique offered was that USAID's assistance promoted the fiscal dependence of civil society organizations on international funding. While most admit that local resources are insufficient to support civil society institutions and their programs, they express concerns about the possibility of international financing driving the agenda of civil society:

> They [AID] also have financed Participación Ciudadana, but they do not finance Participación Ciudadana for it to do what it wants to do. Nor do they finance the PUCMM [Catholic University of our Mother and Teacher] for what it wants to do. They finance them for programs that coincide with their position. I do not go as far as saying that they dictate to P.C., you have to do this thing and the results have to be such. No, no, but I think that they impose an agenda on civil society. [14]

While FINJUS and P.C. claimed they shared many of USAID's principles and interests, others civil society leaders and state officials questioned the independence of organizations who work on issues for which USAID makes funding available. For them, USAID directs the agenda of local organizations through making funds available for certain lines of action and not others: "They have lines of actions and they impose those lines of action by the simple means of saying, 'I have the money and if you want it here it is. It is for these things and not those.'" [15] Thus, through their fiscal dependence, local organizations could end up limiting their work to the implementation of USAID's strategic planning for the island. While some of that planning might be negotiated with civil society, it mostly reflects U.S. foreign policy interests in the D.R. and the Caribbean, which might conflict with the aspirations of the different sectors of Dominican society.

Despite this critique, almost no one would reject USAID's, or any other international organization's, financial assistance. Yet, they do call for that assistance to be re-thought and re-directed based on an agenda that reflects the concerns and priorities of Dominicans. According to the Executive Director of Ciudad Alternative, an urban development NGO, committing USAID resources to the fulfillment of a nationally defined agenda would transform that aid from mere financial assistance seeking to ensure their own particular political and financial interests in the island into true international cooperation dedicated to the development of the D.R.

The second major critique of USAID's civil society program is that it has helped empower upper- and middle-class organizations under the guise of civil society:

> Not only are there few spaces for [civil society] to participate in, but those that do participate are not always the most impoverished sectors. They are a 'perfumed' civil society, as a friend of mine likes to call them.[16]

As discussed earlier, USAID's main collaborators, P.C. and FINJUS, were formed by highly educated middle class professionals, academics, lawyers and entrepreneurs. Thus, as in other countries, USAID helped empower elite organizations formed by people whose authority emanates mostly from their possession of expert knowledge and/ or capital (Carothers 1999, 218). To be sure, expert knowledge and members of the elite can be part of progressive change movements. Yet, the disproportionate support of this sector questions whether USAID actually promoted the existence of a vibrant civil society. At best, USAID contributed to the consolidation of strong watchdog and lobbying organizations whose programming impacts other, more popular sectors of civil society, such as the Network of Citizen Electoral Observers.

The class bias in USAID's programming has helped sustain the unequal political influence of upper class organizations to the detriment of the popular sector:

> Sadly the perception of the Dominican civil society is that the sectors that have greater impact are more related to the middle class and entrepreneurs, and I think that…this is another of the deficits of the Dominican democracy, that the popular sectors, the poorest sectors, do not have any type of representation.[17]

The problem with the empowerment of elite organizations is that their prominence has marginalized the influence of popular sectors of Dominican society. This marginalization exposes civil society as a space which replicates the broader socio-economic inequalities plaguing Dominican society. It also questions the assumption that civil society represents an

undifferentiated citizenry. Unfortunately, USAID's programming has exacerbated those inequalities by providing resources to those organizations that represent well-off sectors of the D.R.[18] The Dominican case supports Carrothers' (1999) claim that USAID's promotion of a lobbying culture "is just as likely to reinforce the dominance of powerful private interests that learn to use the paths opened up by civic activists and then outweigh those activities by dint of resources and activities" (223).

A third critique highlights the fact that USAID's financial assistance usually requires local organizations to have a legal persona, expert personnel and to produce evaluation reports. These funding requirements have led to the NGOification and professionalization of civil society. Two major problems were associated with this transformation: the increased cost of social change efforts and the draining of leaders from popular movements to NGOs.[19] The combination of these two problems has resulted in the weakening of more traditional forms of citizen organizing:

> The whole decade of the '90s constitutes itself as a protagonist exercise of entrepreneurial groups, NGOs and NGO networks in civil society. All these other sectors begin to decline: labor unions have less and less strength, student groups are less and less powerful…Social and neighborhood movements begin to fight for their survival and local vindications.[20]

Thus, social movements were adversely affected by the visibility and authority gained by NGOs as 'civil society,' a phenomenon fostered by USAID's civil society program.

Overall, critiques of USAID acknowledge that this agency has played a role in improving civil society and democracy in the D.R. But, they argue USAID's reformist agenda privileges the political and economic interests of the U.S. If USAID ever moved beyond that agenda, they would realize that Dominicans have other visions and projects of democracy that combine political reform with socio-economic justice.

> We want a well functioning justice system. We want education to function. We want our health system to function. We want to the Rule of Law and the constitution to be followed. We want transparency. We want access to information. We want all that. Up to that point we agree. Beyond that we would have to see what they are positing. It is my judgment, for example, that the grave problem of social inequality is not in USAID's agenda, although health and education is in the agenda, but the structural critique of the model is not in their agenda.[21]

Certain Dominican political reformers aspire to a substantive democracy that goes beyond the efficient functioning of state institutions. For them, democratic participation means much more than political participation; it means greater participation in the social, economic and cultural wealth of the country by all Dominicans, not just those with the tools and resources to be heard. Social justice, then, is one principle on which some Dominican activists question the limits of USAID's programming.

Conclusion

The different appraisals of USAID's collaboration with local civil society organizations demands that any inquiry into it withhold a priori judgments of U.S. involvement as one more act of foreign interventionism. To be sure, sovereignty is still a very salient political issue given the D.R.'s long history of U.S. military interventions. But, in our present global era, the transnationalization of social, economic and political processes has undermined the coherence and authority of nation-state boundaries. Debates over the role of international aid targeting political change in developing countries need to contend with the transnationalization of politics without being naïve to questions of imperialism. Therefore, my analysis of international aid and political change in the D.R. avoids both Manichean and

apologetic distinctions between the U.S. and the D.R. based solely on the issue of national sovereignty. Instead, I listened to local Dominican activists who both acknowledged and critiqued USAID's investment in the consolidation of civil society and a strong democratic system of governance in the D.R.

My research found that USAID and some local actors have different visions of and goals for civil society in the D.R. While both USAID personnel and Dominican civil society activists aspire to a participatory democratic system of governance in which civil society plays an important role, not all Dominicans define civil society, envision its role or conceive of democracy in the same manner as USAID. Thus, despite the many positive experiences of collaboration between USAID and some civil society organizations, others have expressed certain reservations about USAID's role in the D.R.

Despite its commendable efforts, USAID could benefit from addressing some of the limits pointed out by local Dominican activists. USAID should rethink its Democracy Initiative from the perspective of local civil society organizations pursuing a broader vision of democracy, which includes a social justice component. Moreover, USAID should move from a model of financial assistance to a model of cooperation in which local actors have greater decision-making control over funds. Dominican has proven their capacity to manage those funds and develop strong initiatives dealing with high priority issues. Its time for USAID to trust the capacity it has helped build for over fifteen years. Furthermore, USAID should consider issues of economies of scale by avoiding redundant projects and promoting a greater coordination of efforts among local Dominican actors. Lastly, most Dominican civil society organizations are willing to accept USAID's aid and collaboration, but only if that aid focuses on issues deemed relevant by them. Beyond that, most civil society organizations are adamant about parting ways with that funding.

Finally, civil society organizations should make international assistance a serious issue of reflection and dialogue. This dialogue should result in a national plan outlining the pressing needs and interests of civil society. This national plan should guide the efforts of international organizations, like USAID, interested in working with civil society and strengthening Dominican democracy. That plan should have as its top priorities increasing the representation of popular organizations in all political reform processes and reducing the use of financial assistance to impose a foreign policy through civil society organizations.

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[1] Ex-General Coordinator of Participacion Ciudadana and Member of its National Council, Interview
[2] Senior project director, USAID's Strategic Objective Democracy and Governance section, Interview
[3] Ibid.
[4] The only exception was one USAID representative who was part of the selection committee but held no voting rights. Former Director of the AID sponsored PID, Interview
[5] Senior project director, USAID's Strategic Objective Democracy and Governance, Interview
[6] Former Director of the AID sponsored PID, Interview
[7] http://www.usaid.gov/our_work/democracy_and_governance/technical_areas/civil_society/, visited 5/10/2006
[8] Participación Ciudadana 2005
[9] FINJUS 2005
[10] Senior Project Director, FINJUS, Interview.
[11] Senior project director, USAID's Strategic Objective Democracy and Governance section, Interview
[12] Senior Project Manager, FINJUS, Interview
[13] Coordinator of the Political Analysis Commission, P.C., Interview
[14] Director of DIAPE, Interview
[15] Executive Director of CONARE, Interview
[16] ibid.
[17] Member of P.C.'s National Council, Interview
[18] The PID, once more, stands as a very honorable exception.
[19] Processes and Sustainability Work Group Coordinator, Centro Padre Juan Montalvo, Interview; Coordinator of the Education Area, Centro Padre Juan Montalvo, Interview
[20] Processes and Sustainability Work Group Coordinator, Centro Padre Juan Montalvo, Interview

[21] Executive Director, CONARE, Interview

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