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Introduction

It is an honour and a great pleasure for me to welcome you at the Annual Roundtable of the European Centre for Development Policy Management in Maastricht, particularly at a moment when this old city of the Netherlands is showing Africa not in the usual way, with pictures of drought, hunger or war, but with both ancient and modern expressions of art. Within the heavy workprogramme of this Roundtable, we have made a special effort for you to see some of these masterpieces, that provide a brighter image of Africa's cultural heritage and potential.

Looking back, it is undoubtedly the most differentiated group of actors in development so far brought together here in Maastricht for one of our workshops. Indeed, among the participants we find members of past and present African governments, major donors, the civil society (i.e. trade unions, chambers of commerce, non-governmental organizations, churches) and researchers on African history and political systems. I thank you all for having accepted our invitation to this non-negotiating meeting, where everybody represents only himself or herself and can thus feel free to participate actively and candidly in the discussions.

There are several reasons for having brought together at this Roundtable such a variety of actors and stakeholders. Firstly, it has always been a basic working principle of the Centre to bring together, in an informal setting, different actors and stakeholders in development. Too rarely do they have the opportunity to exchange views -other than among their peers- on issues that are of mutual interest. The development sector is a house with too many rooms, where people live in "splendid isolation" from each other. The net result of this has too often been a reductionist and poorly informed approach to complex development problems and processes.

A second reason is the topic of today's Roundtable. The process of democratization and related search for a new set of relationships between state and civil society is a topic which, by its very nature, can not be approached in a top-down way or in negotiations on political conditionalities. The "voice" of the civil society, in all its diversity, has too long been missing in this crucial debate.

Finally, it makes little sense to discuss new arrangements for participatory governance in a vacuum, as if African countries had no pre-existing institutional systems and practices, rooted in their history and cultural traditions.

The call for democracy

Democratization is the new buzz-word across the world. Eastern Europe is slowly - and in some cases with major difficulties - coming to grips with democracy. All over Latin America autocracies have been replaced, at least formally, by democratic systems. Even in hierarchical Asia, traditional power structures are being challenged, as exemplified in the cases of South Korea and, more recently, Thailand.

The worldwide thrust towards political liberalization has also moved to the forefront in Africa. As a result of both internal and external factors, Africa today experiences a sudden revival (and I put the emphasis on revival) of pro-democracy pressures, a popular (although primarily urban) call for a new political order, mainly based on multi-party systems and free elections. As a result, the postcolonial authoritarian one-party state has come under fire. It is claimed that almost universally, the authoritarian system has failed to link up with society and deliver development. Worse, it is said to have almost generally "degenerated into a form of oligarchic patrimonialism that was even unknown in pre-colonial Africa".

This call for a radical overhaul of the existing system can only be applauded by those concerned with development. No country can move towards sustainable development without law and order, without responsible and accountable leadership, without strong institutions and in the absence of enough "room" for people to put their capabilities to use and to express themselves.

In recent years, many conferences have dealt with the topic of political democratization in Africa. A general consensus has emerged across the board on the basic content of the political reform agenda. The following principles of governance appear to be increasingly considered as universally applicable: the rule of law with a really independent judiciary; effective participation of the various actors in decision-making; public accountability; transparency; respect for human rights, and a free press and other media. I think we are all very familiar with these themes. I therefore would ask each and everyone not to fall in the easy trap of rehearsing them during this Roundtable.

The purpose of this meeting is fundamentally different. While it is now agreed that Africa needs a new institutional framework to manage its development process, the question remains **how** this can be achieved.

Why is it so difficult for key actors in development to learn from previous mistakes? In this context, it is frightening to note how little resistance is given by Africans to the very idea of importing Western models of democracy, constitutions and electoral procedures. This reflects the absence so far of a genuinely "African discourse on democracy" and related search for institutional arrangements, rooted in African traditions and societal life and relevant to present day realities. To remedy this, it is vitally important to relate the contemporary process of democratization to the African heritage. This is not an easy task. There is no such thing as a single African heritage, but a plurality of heritages - good or bad. We need to avoid digging into the past as archeologists in search of idealized systems of governance. The key challenge is to find a blend between tradition and modernity, between indigenous culture and relevant foreign experiences. In this respect, I am delighted to have participants from Botswana, Burundi and Uganda among us, and hope they will use this floor to expand on their attempts to find indigenous systems allowing for effective forms of citizen influence in political life. The same applies for the members of the African civil society, some of them now actively involved in national conferences and thus familiar with the difficulties of building a new political culture on the remnants of the past.

A second "morbid symptom" is the current tendency - visible both among African opposition parties and donors pushing for political reforms - to **equate democracy with multi-party systems**. This may fit the bill of the (educated) urban elites, whose claim for "more space" can no longer be contained. But it would be unwise to see multi-partyism and competitive elections as a panacea for democracy and a sufficient guarantee for "good governance". In my view, there is an urgent need to broaden the debate. A healthy democratic life cannot emerge from so narrow an instrument as multi-party politics alone. We should constantly keep in mind the possible dangers of multi-partyism in the present context of Sub-Saharan Africa. I refer in this respect to the danger of polarization among ethnic, religious or subnationalist lines. I could also point to the lack of social cohesion allowing for an effective clustering of societal forces in different parties; or to the organizational weakness of civil society and the lack of countervailing power. Questions can also be raised about the quality and legitimacy of the new leaders. One African commentator in a reputable African weekly recently wrote: "the one-party system is not dead: it has only multiplied itself". Inter-party violence is already a major feature of political life in the new democracies. It is not clear what could be the developmental benefits of these rivalries for the larger parts of the population.

This raises the critical issue of assessing the relevance of multi-party politics for the mass of the population in rural areas, which still represents anywhere between 60 and 90 percent of the total population. If reciprocity has to exist between government and the governed, this inevitably requires an institutional framework closely linked with the people's immediate local environment. Bottom-up approaches to democratization or effective decentralization policies would therefore appear far more important for the people involved than to know that in the capital there has been "une passation des pouvoirs" between parties X and Y.

A third "morbid symptom" is the tendency to **underestimate the complexity of managing the transition process** towards more democratic systems of governance. Thirty years of authoritarian rule have created a major gap between state and civil society, resulting in distrust of officialdom, lack of commitment to government activities and, in some cases, an outright "repli sur soi". This gap will not be closed overnight, at the end of a national conference or by granting legal status to opposition parties. Changes in the nature and role of the state and the rules of the game are never decided on paper. Nor do they result from a linear, smoothly evolutionary process. On the ground, it is often difficult to see what changes are purely cosmetic and temporary, or what changes are indicative of more profound changes in state-society relations. Rear guard battles abound, and so do attempts of incumbent elites - as well as their potential successors who do not necessarily constitute a new political generation - to control from above the whole process of reform. We need to distinguish the different actors at play as well as the potential winners and losers of any reform process. We should also keep in mind the extremely volatile political, administrative and economic environment in which new systems of governance will have to be nurtured. In this respect, many scholars are defiantly pessimistic. Some of them argue, for instance, that the current structural adjustment processes are inimical to enhanced participation of civil society in policy-making. This brings me to a major, but often neglected, factor of success in the whole debate on African democratization : the evolution of the economic and social conditions. Democratization and development are Siamese twins. Separating them makes no sense. If the donor community is serious about democratization, it must also commit itself to helping create the necessary conditions for Africa to develop in a globalized world market.

There is a fourth "morbid symptom" which deserves our attention. The effectiveness of the new institutional set-up for state and civil society interactions, however well designed, will ultimately depend on a **mutually agreed new role definition** between state and civil society and the **capacity** of the different parties involved to assume these new roles.

The whole democratization process will remain an empty shell in the absence of a state that has the basic capacity to fulfill its vital functions and in the absence of organized interest groups in civil society that have the capacity to influence the policy process. This raises the question of attitudes that cannot be changed by a stroke of the pen, as well as the appropriate representation of various parts of civil society - particularly women, farmers and youth - at the national level in the various organs of political power. In this respect, the decay of moral frames of reference and the absence of a shared "projet de société" are also critical factors as they tend to generate a culture of negative individualism. One can also raise the question of what could be the role of donors willing to support the development of a balanced system of governance between state and civil society in Africa.

Many of these questions that I have briefly touched upon, are reflected in the annotated agenda, which will form the basis of our discussions tomorrow in the working groups. At this juncture, I would like to express my hope and confidence that in our discussions we shall be able to avoid generalities on the content of the political reform process. This is the easy part of the problem and it has already been done in many other fora. It is much more difficult to analyse, without prejudices and preconceived models in mind, **how** sustainable institutions may be developed allowing for effective linkages between state and civil society in Africa. In the final analysis, one should not forget that these new institutions will not function if they are not accepted by the civil society. Acceptance, in turn, is closely linked to the perception that both state and civil society have of each other. There is, for instance, little hope for improvement, if the civil society continues to perceive the state as the enemy or the "occupant".

In bringing together such a distinguished and varied group of key actors in development, we hope to have created the conditions for a constructive exchange of views, allowing us to go a step further towards the achievement of what remains a longterm process of political, economic and societal transformation.

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