

**EVALUATING US DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN THE
BALKANS:
IRONIES, INCONSISTENCIES, AND UNEXAMINED
INFLUENCES**

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Executive Summary

Drawing on material produced by a range of US organizations and agencies in the period 2000-2006, this paper examines the methodologies and contents of USAID-funded assessments and evaluations of civil society, and interventions in civil society. Treating these documents as examples of a particular genre of writing, I examine first the extent to which these assessments follow one or more templates or formulas, second whether the information that they contain can be harvested to generate strategic and transferable lessons learned, and third, the argument that the way evaluations are generated, which relies on specialized for-profit firms often working on recurring contracts, raises problems of conflict of interest that impede the production or circulation of knowledge.

My conclusion is that despite being produced by able and committed authors, these evaluations are flawed by organizational interests and a lack of both resources and long-term perspectives which conspire to reduce their value and impact in the policy process. They remain, nonetheless, valuable sources on the enduring structural contradictions inherent in the laudable, but still not fully understood or explained, goal of democracy promotion.

Assessors at Work: Kosovo 2004

On March 17, 2004, violent riots broke out across Kosovo, in which 19 people were killed and nine hundred injured. The riots were directed mostly against the province's Serbian minority, but escalated into protests by the Albanian majority against the unpopular United Nations administration, UNMIK. In a report published soon after the events, the respected think-tank the International Crisis Group, made the assessment that "Kosovar Albanian society is deeply troubled, lacking institutions, leadership and the culture to absorb shocks and contain its violent, criminal minority" (ICG 2004: i).

Just two days before the riots, a two-person team had arrived from the United States to conduct an assessment of Kosovo's civil society sector. They were working for Management Systems International (MSI), under an Indefinite Quantity Contract (IQC) from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Their report, submitted on May 2, 2004, acknowledged that they were surprised by the riots, and also stressed the difficulties that they encountered as a result of the riots: they concluded nonetheless that Kosovar civil society, compared to others that team members had assessed, was "considerably more sophisticated than its counterparts" (Blair, Donaghey, and Velija 2004: iv). The report attached considerable blame to UNMIK for the problems of March, and highlighted in particular the importance of the general uncertainty over Kosovo's political future that UNMIK's presence perpetuated.

This contrast between assessments of society as "deeply troubled" and civil society as "sophisticated" raises a number of questions. What is the truth-status of assessments and evaluations? What is their scholarly value? What is their impact in wider policy debates? And what else, in the final analysis, do they do? Some of these questions are common to social scientific scholarship more generally, especially in its diagnostic and predictive roles. But

assessments and evaluations, often produced quickly and at the request of well-resourced agencies looking to intervene, constitute a particular genre of avowedly policy-relevant writing which deserves close analysis.¹

In this case, the discrepancy in the conclusions reached can be explained in different ways. It is, of course, possible, that one team was right and the other wrong. It is also conceivable that a “sophisticated” civil society might co-exist with a “deeply troubled” and institution-poor society—especially if one considers the difference between rural and urban realities across the Balkans. The disagreement might also be plausibly explained by differences in sources, methods (including sampling) and conceptual approaches used by the different evaluation and assessment teams.

What cannot be overlooked, however, is the role of different agendas for different assessors and their sources. While it would be an overstatement to suggest, borrowing a phrase from a powerful documentary account of American democracy consultants at work in Bolivia (Boynton 2005), that ICG’s “brand” is crisis, the organization’s reports do emphasize threats of societal breakdown, violence, and corruption, and it could be argued that ICG’s existence is linked to the persistence of such phenomena. The MSI/USAID Civil Society assessment, by contrast, was intended to report on the “state of play” after several years of international investment in the sector and to, in the words of the introduction, “to inform the civil society component of USAID/Kosovo’s strategic plan for 2004-2008.” (Blair, Donaghey, and Velija 2004: iv). It was, then, explicitly designed to identify opportunities for effective and productive

¹ The practice and principles of evaluation have been widely discussed in scholarly circles, and some of the issues discussed in this paper can be traced in publications from two decades ago (see for example Palumbo 1987 (ed.); especially the chapters by Egon Guba and Yvonna Lincoln, and Carol Weiss). I have chosen to focus here less on the theoretical debates and more on the empirical data from a set of evaluations conducted in countries of the former Yugoslavia over the past decade, none of which refer to this literature.

intervention in the near future, rather than emphasize obstacles and problems.

Neither document represents a value-free model of knowledge-production. ICG's doomsaying is close kin to the strand of journalism associated with Robert Kaplan in the early 1990s, emphasizing the ever-present prospects for disorder in the non-Western world. Though such work may include recommendations (ICGs' report makes fourteen, directed to different actors), they are generally broad in scope: expansive, expensive and (arguably) unrealistic. MSI's report, by contrast, is a variant of progressive, liberal scholarship that takes as a given the potential for positive change in any society, seeks to identify the levers of change and offer actionable, incremental recommendations (Moynihan 1969). Its lead author, Harry Blair, is a lecturer in the Department of Political Science at Yale University. He had already led an assessment of the Civil Society Sector in Macedonia, under contract for Development Associates, Inc. (Blair, Blue, Popovski, and Trajkovski 2003) and after the Kosovo reported another MSI team in an assessment of the sector in Serbia (Blair, Herman, Cosic, and Galaty 2004). Both ICG and MSI, then, are in the business of producing texts that do not describe and analyze empirical reality, but seek to advocate or persuade, and thereby influence future policy and practice.

The Tyranny of the Urgent and the Value of Distance

What is also striking, from this Kosovo case, is the value attached to speed of publication for both ICG and MSI. Journalism, of course, is driven by deadlines and the importance of breaking the story, so ICG's haste is understandable. The MSI report, though, represents a different case. By the authors' own account, they arrived two days before the violence erupted, to perform a "routine" assessment. Their report notes that several interviews had to be canceled,

and that the riots, obviously, loomed large in all their conversations. Yet they went ahead and produced their report, on the original schedule, as demanded by the terms of the contract with USAID. It appears that in this case at least, immediacy and punctuality outweighed concerns over sampling and bias. Had it been otherwise, the team might have decided to reschedule their trip and conduct their interviews in a less fraught atmosphere.

What this suggests, then, is the particular value imputed to up-to-date field research by evaluators and assessors. Besides direct observation and face-to-face interviews, it seems that they derive some of their authority from “being there,” and also being there recently. It was this feature, in fact, that sparked the project from which this paper derives, to examine the extent to which field-based, experience-near knowledge—what James Scott terms “metis”—complements, and possibly trumps, knowledge produced from afar (Scott 1998: 311-316). My own training is in anthropology, in which fieldwork is central to the process of knowledge-production. In the particular context of evaluations, there is an apparent bias toward a similar-seeming immediacy in time and space. “Distance” seems to carry little or no value.

Anthropologists, though, tend to write up their research into its final form after returning from fieldwork, over an extended period of time. Distance, in other words, does play a critical role in the production of enduring knowledge. And it was this model that we used in an earlier phase of this research project, in which a number of practitioners from the field of civil society assistance were invited to contribute reflective essays for an edited volume (Brown (ed.) 2006). They were asked, in other words, to evaluate themselves and the projects that they were involved in, after the fact. Our reasoning was that involving people in telling stories in which they were central actors combined the kinds of intimate, first-hand knowledge that otherwise perishes or goes untransferred with the distance generated by elapsed time. Obviously, evaluation cannot be

left in the hands of the practitioners, but the current reliance on external, “parachutist” evaluators who have to extract information from practitioners who are wary of being represented in anything other than favorable terms leads to forms of collusion that contribute to a “no fault” culture in which mistakes or shortcomings are minimized or toned down.²

What also emerged in the writing of that volume, though, is the added value of longer-term perspectives that scholars can provide—a different kind of “distance” again. One of our contributors, for example, had worked on gender equality programming in the Sandžak in Western Serbia, and spoke of the challenges of “changing the culture” to permit participation by women (Sneed 2006). When she presented a draft of her paper at a workshop, one of the discussants, political scientist Susan Woodward, evoked Gregory Massell’s eye-opening book on Soviet policy in Muslim areas in the 1930s, where heavy-handed efforts were made to put an end to “primitive” or “backward” customs of female subordination, either by empowering women, or undermining patriarchal authority (Massell 1974).

Woodward’s point was not, of course, that any straightforward analogy exists between USAID approaches in 2000 and Soviet methods from the 1930s. What the example does prompt, however, is reflection on contemporary discourse and practice. Some of the language in evaluations from Kosovo and Macedonia, for example, offers cultural explanations for program shortcomings, thereby classifying local values as resistant or problematic. Kosovo, reportedly, was “not culturally biased towards broad-based participation” (Morin and Stinson 2001: 28), and at one Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI) staff retreat, in the face of frustrations, a group of implementers decided to introduce quotas for female and youth participation, thereby effectively

² For an insightful discussion of the construction of knowledge through impact assessment in South Asia, see Phillips and Edwards 2000.

coercing local compliance with international expectations (ibid.: 15, 20). Elsewhere, an evaluation of OTI programming in Macedonia suggested that “women only” meetings be organized to bring about changes in cultural practice (Nenon et al. 2003: 14)

I do not mean to suggest that U.S. practitioners in the 1990s and 2000s are wittingly following a template established by Soviets in the 1930s. Can the similarity in the perception of “problem” (women’s apparent non-participation in community decision-making) and in efforts to transcend these problems, be labeled simply as coincidence, or is further explanation necessary? If the latter answer is chosen, then one pathway is to suggest elements of shared cultural practice exist not only between the communities targeted for intervention, but also among the organizations seeking to bring about change. And in this case, U.S. history offers examples of other “true believers” who not only shared some of the same tendencies, but provided more precedents for contemporary practice than are generally acknowledged.

For example, one might point to some of the “civilizing” ideas espoused by so-called Progressive politicians in the early twentieth century, especially evident in the course of U.S.-Philippine relations in the wake of the Spanish-American War (Traub 2008). More recently, and closer to home, we might point to efforts during the 1960s “decade of development” both at home in the U.S. in the “war on poverty,” in which the Office of Economic Opportunity, or OEO, espoused the idea of “maximum feasible participation” (Cahn and Passett (eds.) 1971; Moynihan 1970) as well as in efforts in Latin America, where U.S. agencies supported the establishment of local committees “to teach the people they had certain rights” and thus “train backward (sic) villagers for ‘democracy’” (Paddock and Paddock 1973: 41; 46).

Teaching in the Present, Learning from the Past

These precedents, more perhaps than the Soviet example, remind us that some actors in the U.S. view democracy in general and citizen-driven participatory decision-making in particular, as a U.S. birthright. Only a handful of the evaluations go so far as to cite De Tocqueville, the origin point of this viewpoint, directly, but the legacy of his observations runs through the multiple references to “citizen participation” and less common, but nonetheless noticeable, mentions of “town meetings.” Perhaps the most striking direct citation is in a claim about what participants would remember from DEMNET, an initiative implemented across Eastern Europe by different organizations. According to one evaluation, participants had learned and put into practice that “the most natural privilege of man (sic), next to the right of acting for himself, is that of combining his exertions with those of his fellow creatures and of acting in common with them” (America’s Development Foundation 2004: v). The unselfconscious repetition of language produced at a time when women didn’t vote—though, as in all cultures, they undoubtedly found ways to be political and active—glosses over the context-specificity of the sentiment, in the desire to recast this ethos as universal.

De Tocqueville is also evoked explicitly twice, by teams led by Harry Blair, in reference to the participatory meetings that lie at the center of many U.S., programs (a point discussed further below) and serve as “schools for democracy” (Blair, Donaghey and Velija 2004: 27); or “schools of experience in grassroots citizen democratic action” (Blair, Herman, Cosic and Galaty 2004: 13). Similar claims are made for OTI’s program in Macedonia, in which, reportedly, “CBUs [Confidence Building Units – see fn4, below] became community forums for local citizens to learn how to participate in community decision-making” (Millsap and Brusset 2003: 26). There is a lack of self-consciousness about this language, which seems to assert a

pedagogical status for the United States and the practices it promotes.

Elsewhere in the evaluations, a careful reader can observe that this assertion does not go unchallenged by local participants. In interviews, participants describe US organizations as “too directive, too controlling” (Taylor 2000: 45), and their weariness of expatriate trainers who drop in for weekends to offer condescending or infantilizing advice to audiences who are smart, cosmopolitan and highly educated, and who resent what they often see as “dumbed-down” presentations of the virtues of the United States, and critiques of Eastern Europe as “misdeveloped” (Hoy 1998: 37).

That resentment, or at least cynical detachment, was already a feature of intellectual discourse in Eastern Europe—George Konrad, for example, noted what he termed American “lecture platform self-congratulation” (1984: 62). The post-Cold War U.S. combination of triumphalism and the missionary ethos in Eastern Europe has now drawn the attention of a range of scholars. In a long and critical piece on international intervention in Bosnia, John Fawcett and Victor Tanner argue that Bosnia represented a turning point for US interventions of a non-military kind, in tandem with the Clinton administration’s initiative in creating the Office of Transition Initiatives.

OTI was created to build a bridge between humanitarian and development assistance in a way that set foreign countries on a particular path to market-based democracy. And in Bosnia, they write, “America cast itself as the benevolent victor: it would provide assistance, but assistance that encouraged movement towards liberal economics and democracy” (Fawcett and Tanner 2000: 181). Mark Duffield, writing also of this moment, suggested that “transition” was a new code for “development” that put the so-called Second World into a particular relation of penetrability to the United States and the West (Duffield 1999: 135). Anthropologists Gerald

Creed and Janine Wedel make a similar argument with regard to the cultural othering of Eastern Europe, the Balkans, and the Former Soviet Union in the course of the 1990s (Creed and Wedel 1997).

The irony in recent history is that as a presidential candidate in 2000, George W. Bush distanced himself from President Clinton, his immediate predecessor, and called for “humility” in U.S. foreign policy. As President, however, he widely praised Progressivist-era Theodore Roosevelt (whose biography is one of the few books he has claimed to have read while in office) as well as Ronald Reagan, both of whom are central figures in the history of U.S. self-image of benevolence and relentless economic advance around the world. Candidate Bush urged audiences not to pursue policies that might feed stereotypes of “The Ugly American.” In so doing, in a further irony, he aligned himself with John F. Kennedy, for whom the 1958 book of that title, combined with other factors (like the ugly footage, now available on You Tube, of Vice President Nixon’s hostile greeting in Caracas in the same year) served as motivation to launch the Alliance for Progress and the new Foreign Assistance Act, to make United States aid smarter and more effective.³

What President Bush also inherited, though, alongside the ideological certitudes of America’s unilateral prerogative and duty to promote democracy, was a fierce desire by the Republican Party, and especially Congress, to wage war on “big government.” From 1996 onward, Republicans in Congress sought to shut down USAID entirely. Again, this was not without precedent: writers have pointed to a near-continuous “siege mentality” within the agency (Snook 1999), and the history of questioning foreign aid goes back even further.

³ For newsreel footage see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xNsp8B1qII8>.

Frank Coffin, an advocate for the principle of foreign aid, reports that there was on average one presidential, congressional or other governmental study about foreign aid every year from 1950 to 1963 (1964: 43). USAID was heir to this constant questioning of the legitimacy and efficiency of aid, and Coffin notes the self-fulfilling effect of such scrutiny. The relentless focus on verification, and a history of serial investigations and presidential commissions set up to determine what (if anything) USAID was accomplishing, served to undermine and erode trust between implementers and critics.

Evaluations: Between the Ideal and the Real

This process also drove the production and public availability of the evaluations on which this paper is based. Yet what the evaluations themselves additionally reveal is the gap between the ideal impact evaluation—which many evaluators themselves describe as well-resourced, multi-staged, including a baseline study undertaken before a project began, and grounded in social scientific methodology—and the ad hoc, after-the-fact nature of most of the evaluation that is actually carried out and reported.

For projects which for the most part involve the expenditure of \$5-\$10 million, and sometimes as much as \$15 million, conducted over two years (the typical Office of Transition Initiatives project) or more, the “typical” evaluation appears to be budgeted at between \$15,000 and \$30,000. It is conducted by one or two expatriate experts, usually on the basis of one or two weeks of field research in collaboration with locals as consultants, interpreters, or coordinators.

Typically, again, this field research consists of interviews with international personnel (who are generally the managers of the projects under scrutiny), and local employees, with focus groups organized through local NGOs: sometimes, as in the Kosovo case with which we began,

or others, the field research is itself truncated further. Most evaluators also rely heavily on existing project documentation. They sometimes commission a wider opinion survey, or use results from a prior survey that seem pertinent. The expatriate evaluators then spend two to three weeks writing up their reports, which often draw language from their own previous work in a cut and paste mode, and which contain disclaimers as to their truth-value.⁴

The Dance of the Acronyms and the Business of Post-Conflict Democracy Promotion

There is, then, a “Kabuki” or “Potemkin” quality to these evaluations: ostensibly part of a debate, they are in fact ritualized moves in what has been described in the context of Congressional debates over appropriations as the “dance” of foreign aid (Irwin 2002). This, in fact, drives a considerable part of the evaluations’ value for a reader. Leaving aside what their substance reveals about the state of civil society, the rule of law, local government reform, or gender equality in the Balkans, these evaluations map a world defined by its jargon, where acronyms jostle for meaning and precedence.

It is a world in which, under the umbrella of a program (KTI, HCI, CBI (formerly known as CMI), CRDA (both an acronym and a near homonym for the Serbian slogan for the program, SADA!), DART, LGRP, CSHI, DEMNET, CSSP) designed to meet a USAID target (an SO, or perhaps an IR), local employees or partners (FSNs or maybe PLIs) of US-based or global NGOs (such as CHF, MCI, ADF, CRS, ISC, ORT or IOM) oversee the recruitment and operation of vehicles of local participation (CACs, CICs, CDGs or CDCs, CBUs (defined as another name for

⁴ Several evaluators include language that reveals their own awareness of the limitations and constraints—flagging, for example, the pressures to include quantitative measures and limited time available for data collection (Nenon et al. 2003: 8; Taylor 2000: 10). There are some examples of cut-and-paste writing, in the civil society assessments for Kosovo and Serbia published in May and August 2004, and authored by teams headed by Harry Blair in each case.

NGOs which others describe as CSOs) or CHAGs. Evaluations, in turn, are carried by individuals contracted to another set of acronymic agencies (MSI, ARD) or names that don't immediately flag their bearers' activities (Chemonics International or Creative Associates being just two examples).

Paying attention to this forest of symbols might seem like an exercise in trivia. But the profusion of terms is illuminating—it is a reflection, again, of processes set in train in the 1970s and pushed further during the Reagan presidency, but also continued under President Clinton by USAID administrator Brian Atwood. These processes increasingly turned USAID into a managerial organization, with the actual work of implementation and evaluation of programs carried out by NGOs and contracting firms.⁵

⁵ This sentence facetiously over-emphasizes the professionalized guild language in which these evaluations are often written. A feature shared by all the evaluations sampled is a glossary of acronyms: readers can use this sentence—which contains only a small sample of the terms in use-- as a diagnostic to see how versed they are in this jargon. In order: KTI is the Kosovo Transition Initiative; HCI, the Healthy Communities Initiative (Kosovo, implemented by Mercy Corps), CBI, Macedonia's Confidence Building Initiative (which was initially dubbed the Conflict Mitigation Initiative, but that name tested poorly with Macedonian audiences; CBI also exists in); CRDA is the Community Revitalization through Democratic Action program which operated in Serbia, and then Montenegro. A DART is a Disaster Assistance Response Team (Bosnia), a technique that was then used as shorthand for an entire programmatic approach (Fawcett and Tanner 2000): LGRP is Local Government Reform Project (Serbia, Kosovo, Macedonia); CSHI is the Community Self-Help Initiative (Macedonia); DEMNET is Democracy Network (Croatia, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Macedonia—and before that in other Eastern European locations, including Hungary and Ukraine); CSSP is Civil Society Strengthening Program (Macedonia, Kosovo—again, used elsewhere in the world, including South Africa and Indonesia). SO is a strategic objective, and IR an intermediate result: FSNs are Foreign Service Nationals, who constitute the bulk of USAID personnel overseas; PLIs are Partners for Local Initiatives (a term used to describe local NGO subcontractors/implementers/counterparts). The US NGOs listed here either are or were formerly also known as Cooperative Housing Foundation, Mercy Corps International, America's Development Foundation, Catholic Relief Services, Institute for Sustainable Communities, *Obshchestvo Remeslenovo i Zemledelcheskovo Truda* (a Russian acronym, translated as The Society for Handicrafts and Agricultural Work) and the International Organization for Migration. CACs are Citizen Assistance Centers (supported by LGRP in Serbia); CICs are Community Improvement Councils (used by Kosovo Transition Initiative (Morin and Stinson 2001: 15) and Macedonia's LGRP; CDGs are Community Development Groups (OTI Serbia 2000-2002) and CDCs are Community Development Councils (CRDA, CHF in Southern Serbia). CBU's are Confidence Building Units (CBI, Macedonia), and are sometimes whole communities, and at other times either non-governmental organizations or civil society organizations. CHAGs are Community Health Advocacy Groups (Kosovo, Mercy Corps – see Mercy Corps n.d.). The two

Those reforms of USAID were undertaken in the name of effectiveness, efficiency and flexibility as well as ideological commitment to privatization (Ruttan 1996: 229) and one can argue that they did initially accomplish some positive change. But critics argue that over time, the initial nimbleness delivered by setting up a form of competition between potential implementers was lost (ibid.: 230ff.) The effect of large sums of government money flowing through the system transformed edgy, creative NGOs into docile, complacent contractors (see, for example Fawcett and Tanner 2000: 161).

Reviews of NGO budgets over these years, as well as implementers interviewed for this and related research projects, confirm that in financial terms, U.S. NGOs (or as they are more generally known, Private Voluntary Organizations – PVOs) have become parastatal organizations. Non-profit firms must make certain documentation public, and these records are made available by watchdog organizations, including guidestar.org. Of the organizations listed above, for example, ADF—America’s Development Foundation—was wholly dependent on government funding for its operations in 2006—that is to say, it drew 100% of its \$40 million revenue from U.S. government sources.

In the same year, CHF (which was formerly the Cooperative Housing Foundation, but now uses only its acronym as its name) received \$98 million of its total \$166 million operating budget from the U.S. Government, again predominantly through USAID. IOM, the International Organization of Migration, is a major implementer for OTI programs, and had a total annual budget of \$733 million, of which \$600 million came from its 122 member states and \$180 million from the US alone. Mercy Corps International (MCI) and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), with their humanitarian and religious roots, draw roughly half of their operating budgets

acronymic evaluating organizations noted here are Management Systems International (Inc) and Association

from other donations, but MCI still received \$109 million of its total \$205 million income from U.S. Government sources in 2006, while CARE received 75% of its 2004 £320 million budget from US Government sources (Keen 2008: 135; other figures drawn from www.guidestar.org).

The higher percentages of governmental funding here are close to those estimated for for-profit contractors like DAI (Development Alternatives Inc.), which was founded in 1970 by several of the professionals involved in the “New Directions” movement of the time, and which implements a significant number of USAID contracts around the world, including many in the field of democracy and governance. Chemonics International reorganized in 2001 to focus on its principal client, USAID, thereby acknowledging the importance of that relationship. The fact that non-governmental organizations now have similar funding streams is an indicator of the blurring of the distinctions between these ostensibly different kinds of implementing organization—also manifested in the increasing use by USAID of “cooperative agreements” as a funding mechanism, which falls between the clearly different modes of “grants” and “contracts” (Merritt 2006).

As NGOs and contractors now operate in multiple realms, evaluations point to another domain of blurriness. Implementers are also evaluators. Chemonics International, for example, have had their own programs evaluated by MSI, and have served as evaluator for ABA/CEELI; ARD is also actively involved both in evaluation of organizations and implementation. According to insiders, this has generated more friction, as companies dispute the findings of critical evaluations by arguing that they are motivated by the desire to gain a competitive edge in future bids for USAID work, and may even threaten legal action when reviewed critically by a

for Rural Development (Inc).

rival.⁶ The movement of individuals between companies, as well as between governmental and non-governmental organizations, further contributes to the blurriness: inevitably, professional contacts are valued as well as technical abilities or field accomplishments.

All of these aspects contribute to significant slippage between open competition and insider trading that surface in evaluation materials. IOM, for example, anticipated OTI programming in Macedonia in 2001, and submitted an unsolicited application that drew heavily on their Kosovo experience (Millsap and Brusset 2003: 10). They were then able to move their operation from Kosovo to Macedonia relatively seamlessly for all concerned—with Nives Mattich, for example, program director in Kosovo, then heading up operations in Macedonia—but in a mode whose efficiency has little or nothing to do with open competition or bidding.

The structural effect of all this multiple outsourcing, lines of subcontracting, and circulation of a relatively small body of individuals who have iterated interactions with one another, is to create what I term extended aid chains.⁷ These are then characterized by friction and wastage. They are leaky, as information flows up and resources flow down, and also inefficient, as those flows influence one another, and arguably, the flow of resources contaminates the flow of information (Keen 2008: 157). Janine Wedel has pointed out that people in socialist societies are experts in “creating fictions to please authorities” (1998: 73) and Charles King as also written of the “ratchet principle” by which success gets overstated to maintain federal appropriations levels (King 2001: 103).

⁶ An example, reported by the Center for Public Integrity, is of a negative evaluation of Chemonics’ implementation of a USAID-funded local government program in Poland, by rival MSI. USAID, reportedly, intervened to protect Chemonics reputation. See www.publicintegrity.org/wow/bio.aspx?act=pro&ddlC=8: accessed January 13, 2009.

Whose Agency? Outsourcing Responsibility

A further effect, though, cuts to the heart of theory about policy-making. Citing Michel Foucault, David Keen argues that instead of dwelling on the fact of inefficiencies, analysts should rather ask what these apparent inefficiencies actually effect in the world (Keen 2008: 14; see also Weiss 1987: 49). Keen also draws on the classic edited volume *Room for Maneuver*, whose contributors note, in particular, the work involved to deliberately separate “policy-making” and “implementation,” which down the road creates a situation in which sub-optimal outcomes (or, in less euphemistic terms, things going wrong) get branded not as failures of policy, but failures of implementation (Keen 2008: 155; see also Clay and Schaffer 1984).

What Clay and Schaffer point to, then, is a variant of what Stanley Milgram, in his classic study of obedience, referred to as the “fragmentation of the total human act” (Milgram 1974:11). Obviously, in the case of foreign aid delivery the consequences are hardly of the same magnitude as in Milgram’s original example, where he argued that the distance from Eichmann shuffling papers to the gas chamber operator dropping the Zyklon-B pellet permitted all those involved to situate ultimate responsibility elsewhere in the chain of causation. But what is striking about the foreign aid chain is how often responsibility for disappointing results gets shunted downwards.

In Croatia in 1999, for example, an NGO coalition split, with some NGOs continuing to work with the Open Society Institute and a splinter group opting to associate with OTI’s programs. The evaluation labeled this as “unfortunate” and suggested that responsibility lay with the foreign service nationals or FSNs, who are close to the bottom of the assistance chain (Taylor et al. 2000: 16). The reference to Kosovar society as “not culturally biased toward broad-based participation,” noted earlier, moves responsibility still one step further, embedding the

⁷ For discussions of Aid chains, see Wallace et al. 2006; Carr et al. 1998: 44-64; Sogge 2002: 65-85.

difficulties with implementing progressive programs in local predispositions.

Unexamined Assumptions and Unchallenged Presumptions

Schaffer's chapter in the edited volume that is a part of the overall research effort also serves as a humbling corrective to the naïve idea that the challenge of making policy better can be met simply by writing papers (like this one), pointing out the problems, and expecting them to be fixed once people read the paper. Nor is it a question, in his view, of "being in the room" (or "at the table") during the policy-making process. Both views, argues Schaffer, are based on a mythological idea that policy is made through rational, decision-driven processes: the reality is an incremental establishment of certainties, where there is never a discrete moment of critical decision-making (Schaffer 1984:148ff.).

One reminder of this truth is the persistent, dominant, and unquestioned subtext running through the evaluations on which this paper draws for evidence, which presents the syllogism:

Wider participation = civil society = democracy = the good

This belief persists despite a plethora of trenchant and persuasive criticism to the contrary, among which I would locate Thomas Carothers' work from the early 1990s onward. In particular, he urged people to think again about civil society in the widely-distributed and influential journal, *Foreign Policy*, in 1999-2000, drawing on scholarly work from the previous decade to rebut the simplistic view of civil society as a panacea (Carothers 1999-2000). But as late as 2004, at least, the evaluations remain firmly located in a neo-Tocquevillean world of civil society's promise. Among their reference points for this is work by Robert Putnam including

Making Democracy Work (Putnam 1993), a book that also captured President Clinton’s imagination and attention and so, perhaps, represents a curious form of “court-approved” scholarship.⁸

Evaluations themselves do, of course, contain some critical commentary on programming tactics. Several point to USAID’s and OTI’s emphasis on “quickness” as problematic, and having the potential to yield counter-productive effects in the longer term (see for example USAID/Macedonia 2005: 10; Czajkowska et al. 2005:19). More striking to a reader with the leisure to be critical is the number of elisions, slippages and assumptions that pass unremarked. This is especially marked, as one might expect, in documents framed as assessments or evaluations, but in fact produced by program implementers.

One such report, for example, presents as self-evident that a reconstructed playground constitutes fulfillment of the objective of “promoting and expanding democratic behaviors” on the grounds that it creates a “vibrant public space” where adults, as well as children, will come together and interact (Perlow 2005: 15). Where some cases of flexibility seem to have been responses to local needs—in Kosovo, for example, local groups drew on funds committed for health to finance road construction, making the argument that it would facilitate access to health services (Mercy Corps n.d.: 4)—here the driving force behind flexible interpretation of donor intent appears to be to prove implementer effectiveness in meeting demands set from above.

A similar implementer-serving reinterpretation of a donor goal can be seen in the assessment of OTI’s Confidence Building Initiative in Macedonia, where the goal of “promoting and expanding democratic behaviors at the community level” was reportedly met by showing

⁸ This is not to say that the evaluations lack scholarly perspectives, but rather that they are often informed by particular scholarly perspectives. Another example—drawn from Putnam’s work, again—is the frequent use

that people were willing to “visit places and persons where they had previously been reluctant to do so” (Millsap and Brusset 2003: 2). In this case, the evaluators expressed hesitation to make any definite conclusions about impact, as they considered there was a mismatch between goals and program activities.

A further irony in this literature is the importance attached to community participation in much of the democracy promotion programming in the Western Balkans. The impetus for this came from a larger U.S. commitment to supporting alternatives to the centralist political rule, and command economy that was perceived as characteristic of Eastern Europe under Soviet influence. Leading scholars on democratic participation, though, noted long ago that Yugoslavia, with its ideology and practice of local self-management, looked remarkably like a “blueprint for a participatory society” (Pateman 1976: 88). Development professionals in contemporary Macedonia have noted that the language of “action planning” employed by the Institute for Sustainable Communities as part of its DEMNET program had formerly been associated with the Yugoslav state.

Far from being fresh and unfamiliar, or exciting and emancipatory, the community-based approaches endorsed by USAID in the former Yugoslavia struck many locals as largely indistinguishable from systems of decision-making and governance based on the *mesna zajednica*, or local community. In some cases, this deterred some constituencies from taking part (Nenon et al.2003: 13): USAID’s historical ignorance, then, undercut their ability to appeal to those they sought to enthruse.⁹

of the concept of “social capital” without reference to the now significant literature challenging the idea that it represents an unequivocal good.

⁹ A more charitable reading would be to assume that USAID and implementers deliberately chose terminology that would resonate with past traditions and thus gain purchase. In fact, though, Yugoslavia is

Competing Goals: Participation and “Participation”

A larger irony runs through the emphasis on nurturing grass roots democratic practice, where evaluations make clear a dominant concern with ideological concerns and impression management over empirical fact-finding or impact assessment. The evaluators of the Local Government Reform Program in Macedonia, for example, recommended that USAID should seek to win support for its program of rapid decentralization by commissioning a “convincing analysis” to showcase its merits. Evaluators, in other words, recognize the value of positive assessments, and appear to indicate that USAID can pre-order the results that serve their interests (Kobayashi et al. 2004: 27-8).

In the evaluation of the Serbian LGRP, evaluators stated that Citizen Assistance Centers marked a substantive achievement not because of their utility, but because “they visibly embody the philosophy and practices USAID is seeking to instill among local governments” (Priftis and Haselkom 2004: 7-8).

Both of these examples point to the priority placed not on the needs or interests of local communities, but on serving donor perceptions and demands by all those involved in programs, including implementers and evaluators. Local perceptions sometimes appear as only a means to that ultimate end: in OTI’s operations in both Kosovo and Macedonia, for example, evaluations reveal that the “trust” or “confidence” that the programs set out to build or increase was, in the final analysis, not between local communities of different ethnicities, or between citizens and government, but towards OTI’s ability “to realize desired projects in a reasonable time frame” (Morin and Stinson 2001: 10). In OTI’s operations in Macedonia, the same three trust relationships are identified, but the evaluators conclude that the implementers were mainly

routinely cast in the same terms as the rest of Eastern Europe, as victim of a Soviet legacy which holds no

concerned with spending money fast; in their terms, “the ‘burn rate’ became an end in and of itself” (Millsap and Brusset 2003: 3).

What does this data, culled from the margins and from between the lines of these evaluations, add up to? First, it is possible that the level of discussion within USAID and the democracy promotion community is directly related to the level of sophistication and nuance in any given U.S. Administration. If so, then it is possible that a change from the administration that oversaw the production of a 2005 strategy framework for USAID’s democracy and governance work, with the somewhat grandiose title “At Freedom’s Frontiers,” might constitute a first step toward a realistic assessment of the degree to which cronyism, ideological blinkers and privileging the reporting demands of donors over the needs of local communities, have undercut US efforts around the world.

Evaluations, I suggest, constitute a particular literary genre, which reflect the close and ongoing relationship of mutual interest between the individuals and organizations that conduct them, and the individuals and organizations that they purport to scrutinize, as well as the financial linkages between both and the funders of both the programs and the evaluations. For as long as this system of production remains in place, evaluations will tend to follow the form described above in terms of methodologies and contents. They will contain information of the type that this essay has tried to harvest: but in the normal run of things, they will continue to be little-read, and so the lessons they contain not widely learned. They are exercises in information control and management, rather than knowledge production or circulation.

Alternative paradigms of analysis, then, are sorely needed. One way to provoke reflection might be a new, updated version of the 1958 bestseller, *The Ugly American*. That volume, which

promise for the future.

inspired John F. Kennedy while he was still serving as a U.S., Senator, was accessible, anecdotal, and factually-based: what the title obscures is that the authors included, alongside scathing criticism of the complacency of many foreign service officials, several stories of effective and appropriate modes of engagement in foreign assistance. In these stories, the key activities and qualities are close listening to local needs, humility, and cooperation in what is as close to a dialogue of equals as possible. Ironically, the original “Ugly American” demonstrates these skills: he is Homer Atkins, an engineer who opts to live in a village where he and a local counterpart together invent a simple, efficient, and easily produced water pump that enables more efficient irrigation of terraced agricultural land.

Although *The Ugly American* is almost fifty years old, my own conversations with professionals and scholars in the former Yugoslavia emphasize that while the context of U.S. foreign assistance has changed in the absence of a Soviet enemy, some of its conclusions are still valid. So, for example, environmental activist Josif Tanevski recalled positively the efforts that Steve Nicholas, country director for ISC in the mid 1990s, made to tap into and learn from local expertise and experience: he constituted an advisory board of Macedonians for ISC’s initial activities, and involved the board closely in programming and planning. Former Macedonian staff who worked with Nicholas reported favorably on his determination to learn Macedonian, and still remembered some of the mistakes he made in speaking, which seemed to endear him to them even more.

In other interviews, OSI Director Vladimir Milčín, in Skopje, and local ecologist and community activist Aladin Demisovski, in the village of Labuništa, both noted approvingly the efforts made by different US ambassadors (Christopher Hill and Lawrence Butler) to get out from behind their desks, away from the protective cocoon of embassy security, and meet a wide

variety of local people.

Now, with the increased professionalization and mobility of international personnel, as well as heightened concerns over symbolic and physical violence toward U.S. representatives, such warm relations between foreign and domestic collaborators are rarer. But my own experience has been that regionally-focused scholars with long-term commitments in their field area still enjoy approval and confidence, and could usefully advise on programming. Victor Friedman, for example, a Professor at the University of Chicago, has over thirty years of experience in Macedonia, and is widely respected for his incredible linguistic facility in Macedonian, Albanian, Rom, Vlah, Serbian, and Turkish—that is, all the languages of the official census. Eran Fraenkel, who directed *Search for Common Ground* in the 1990s in Skopje, began his acquaintance with fieldwork in the Prespa region of Western Macedonia, and drew on his experience to lead a widely-praised educational media campaign.

I have found my own shorter acquaintance with Macedonia, dating back only to 1992, has long-term consequences. During my most recent visit in summer 2008, when I was seeking to interview participants in and commentators on Macedonian civil society, I discovered that a number of individuals whom I had met informally or casually over the years, with no particular agenda in mind, had played substantial roles at different times in civil society, and because of our prior acquaintance, were more than willing to speak with me.¹⁰ Scholarly engagement doesn't

¹⁰ Two such individuals are Josif Tanevski, mentioned above, whom I met because I taught his children English in a summer school back in 1993, and recalled our meeting when I contacted him, out of the blue, in 2008; and Goran Veličkovski, a leading public interest journalist, with whom I have a very close mutual friend. Veličkovski's weekly television program, *Zevzekmanija*, offers political satire but it also includes a humanitarian or development component each week, as he highlights stories of need from inside the country and invites viewers to offer charitable contributions to address them. Alongside such stories—that document, for example, a shortage of books in a rural school—he also includes tales of common civility that prompt viewers to think about what can be done to improve conditions, with little investment beyond goodwill.

stop, and doesn't necessarily follow the paths one might expect—it can yield unanticipated benefits far into the future.

Conclusion: Ironies Abound

But lest this seem an overly simple and self-congratulatory way to end, let me conclude with a final irony. On two of those visits in 2008, I accompanied a former practitioner from the democracy promotion business, who had been country director for the Institute for Sustainable Communities. Together we met with some of his former employees and grantees to talk about long-term impacts and what we termed “invisible legacies” of the project. We insisted to ourselves and to our interviewees that what we were doing was not an evaluation.

But at a certain point I realized that it was: we were two “expatriates” collaborating with local experts and intermediaries, arranging brief conversations with “insiders” to the processes we were researching in a brief stay in the country, and then writing up our results. Our research was funded by IREX (an organization that also served as an implementer for USAID's media projects in Macedonia), and the immediate output of our research will be a short policy paper for IREX: both facts also blur the line between our research project and an evaluation. So I find myself very much an insider in the processes that I set out to assess, critically, from the outside.

One point of differentiation was that we were working with a film crew to document our interviews, with the goal of also producing a documentary. But this brought about another moment of revelation when Aladin Demisovski, the activist from Labuništa, remarked that for the cost of filming our conversation with him, he could have completed a proposed reconstruction project on a reservoir dam that would have safeguarded water supplies for his village for decades to come.

The further irony here was that the main topic of our conversation was how the legacy of ISC's work had been undone by the subsequent political path of the country. Having successfully set up excellent relations between the voluntary sector, local business, and the mayor's office in his home town of Labuništa, Demisovski and others had created a community plan that would, over ten years of collaborative work, address the core problems identified by citizens. But as part of the U.S. and EU-brokered Ohrid Framework Agreement that ended a violent insurgency in Macedonia in 2001, Labuništa's independent municipality was dissolved, and the village absorbed into a large administrative unit with its main seat in Struga. Through a combination of long-standing rivalry between Struga and Labuništa and party politics, all initiatives coming from Labuništa have been blocked since this change.

This possible turn of events was foreseen in a 2004 evaluation of local government in Macedonia, which observed that "Consolidation of municipalities will increase the risk that populations of small municipalities will be underserved as political advocacy for their needs will be reduced or eliminated. Designing a political mechanism to ensure small localities have an adequate voice in local resource allocation decisions will be needed" (Kobayashi et al. 2004: 6). Our conversation with Demisovski in 2008 made apparent that this recommendation—included in the seventh of ten key findings in the evaluation—was never taken up: local needs and voluntarism, briefly emphasized and nurtured by U.S. programs designed to promote civic participation, were again sidelined by larger political concerns.

For all the successes and progress reported in these evaluations, the facts on the ground once more reinforced the message that emerges all too clearly from USAID programming and program evaluation: citizens of the former Yugoslavia who place value in clarity, sincerity and consistency cannot look to the United States for inspiration. Clear-eyed, independent assessment

continues to be pushed aside by networked, collusive practices of reporting which do nothing to shift the deeply institutionalized and self-reinforcing status quo.

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