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**To cite this article:** Nathan Vandeputte (2024) The suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility in Uganda: the illusion of “politically smart aid”, *Development in Practice*, 34:3, 336-350, DOI: [10.1080/09614524.2023.2238915](https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2023.2238915)

**To link to this article:** <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614524.2023.2238915>



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Published online: 10 Aug 2023.



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# The suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility in Uganda: the illusion of “politically smart aid”

Nathan Vandeputte 

## ABSTRACT

In 2021, the President of Uganda suspended the “Democratic Governance Facility” (DGF), which is a European basket fund aimed at providing financial support in areas such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law. Paradoxically, the DGF had explicitly adopted a new “politically smart framework”, which is a development approach that promises to deliver aid more effectively and sustainably in contentious environments. This raises the question: what went wrong? Informed by post-development theoretical arguments and through a discursive analysis of the DGF’s implementation of this new aid framework, this paper argues that this framework itself does not allow proper understanding of what makes aid “political”; *in casu* that it does not allow appreciation of local viewpoints of democracy, representation, and ownership. Then, rather than improving the status quo, this paper argues in favour of making aid “political” through a fundamental reconsideration of the very substance and infrastructure of aid itself.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 8 September 2022  
Accepted 6 June 2023

## KEYWORDS

Uganda; democracy support; thinking and working politically; political aid; post-development

## Introduction

On 2 January 2021, in a letter to the Ugandan Minister of Finance, President Museveni of Uganda ordered the suspension of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF). The DGF is a governance program and basket fund established in 2011 by the embassies of Denmark, the United Kingdom (following the conclusion of the first five-year phase in 2016, the UK left the program), Ireland, Austria, Sweden, the Netherlands, the European Union (EU), and Norway. In “partnership” with diverse state and non-state actors, and “aligned” to Ugandan national priorities and commitments, the program aimed at providing financial and technical support (worth about €110 million) in order to support “a Uganda where citizens are empowered to engage in democratic governance and the state upholds citizens’ rights” (DGF 2017). Yet, despite such discursive emphasis on “partnership” and “alignment”, in his letter calling for the suspension, President Museveni argued that the DGF nevertheless had financed “activities and organisations designed to subvert Government under the guise of improving governance”, and that Ugandans were only “spectators in the management of their own affairs” (*Monitor*, 4 February 2021). After two years of closure, on 22 June 2022, the president agreed to lift the ban on condition that the Government of Uganda (GoU) should be represented in the DGF’s decision-making structures (*Monitor*, 23 June 2022). The donors, however, did not agree and, in October, it was revealed that they will cut the funding, and thus that the DGF will cease to exist (*The Observer*, 26 October 2022).

The DGF remarkably sought to “be politically smart” in terms of the design and implementation of its aid projects (DGF 2017, 6–7). This is a direct reference to a new toolbox within the development

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aid community which seeks to do better at “thinking and working politically”. In brief, a closer deliberation and negotiation with local networks and organisations is believed to make aid interventions more practical, appropriate, and sustainable (Booth and Unsworth 2014; Carothers and De Gramont 2013). Yet, given that the DGF was suspended, the question arises as to whether such a new framework really does make aid more sustainable. Therefore, the main research question this paper seeks to address is: did the DGF merely fail to be “smart” in the design and implementation of its aid, or is there something more deeply amiss with this new approach to political aid as such?

In what follows, I will, first of all, elaborate on such more general turns to “politically smart aid”, before explaining this paper’s theoretical and methodological considerations for analysis, i.e. post-development theory. On this basis, this paper argues that whereas there may well be some questions as to whether the DGF has been sufficiently “smart”, even the best application of this aid framework would not have made the DGF interventions more appropriate and sustainable. To the contrary. The central explanation that I put forward is that “politically smart programming” proves to be incapable of actually dealing with difference or contestation as it only applies a very narrow understanding of what “being political” entails. As the case of the DGF in Uganda will make clear, it is only designed to engage contestation on the “programmatic” level, not the level of ontology. In other words, it is only designed to make aid more effective, not to properly reconsider the imperatives of aid itself. Yet, it is exactly such ability to encounter the ontological level that is increasingly demanded by the current context; *in casu* the ability to reflect on how democracy and representation are locally translated. Such finding holds important implications not only for the international community in Uganda, but also for the democracy support community more generally. Indeed, whereas the current trend within this community – and also academic literature – seeks to continuously finetune the current political aid framework, this paper argues in favour of the opposite: to abandon it altogether. If democracy aid is to become truly “political”, we should first of all dare to question the very imperatives of such aid: *why* do we seek to do it?

### **Status quaestionis: the turn to “politically smart aid”**

Ever since 2000, when the international community in Uganda first established the “Human Rights and Good Governance Liaison Office” (HUGGO), the *modus operandi* has been to improve coordination amongst donors, and to continuously find ways to better operate democracy aid in sensitive political contexts. For example, after the introduction of multiparty democracy in Uganda (2005), HUGGO took on the “Deepening Democracy Programme”, which aimed at more effective political party assistance and political party dialogue. Later, when such political party assistance proved to be ineffective, as evident from the 2011 general election (see e.g. EU EOM 2011), the focus came to lie more on supporting democracy in the broader sense. HUGGO was renamed “the Democratic Governance Facility” (DGF) and now also the EU joined as a donor (DANIDA 2011). Then, in 2017, following another round of contentious elections, the DGF again sought to adapt. This time, however, DGF II promised to be much more than just a “next phase” or a “continuation”; it promised “to do things differently” and “be politically smart” (DGF 2017, 7). This is a direct reference to a new trend among practitioners: a turn to thinking and working politically.

### **Thinking and working politically**

Despite an often normative rhetoric, the international community has been observed to resort to “less controversial”, “tame”, “depoliticised”, or “developmental” democracy assistance, thereby often prioritising socioeconomic development over political development (Bush 2015; Carothers 2008; Saltnes and Thiel 2021; Wetzel and Orbie 2015). Yet, since such an approach has done little to curb a rising authoritarian trend (Lührmann and Lindberg 2019), and since, in some cases, such an approach is understood to even empower authoritarian rule (Hagmann and Reyntjens 2016), the international community is called upon to “rejuvenate” its democracy support, and “to add more directly political elements to their strategies” (Bouchet, Godfrey, and Youngs 2022; Carothers 2020).

How to pursue openly democratic objectives within an authoritarian context? After all, authoritarian regimes are likely to apply a contrasting understanding of what is considered “a just political order” and, as such, are bound to dispute any international effort to undermine such order (Poppe and Wolff 2013). This brings us to a second aspect of how democracy aid is understood to become “political”: namely, that it should be pursued through “politically smart” methods (Carothers and De Gramont 2013, 125–6). Generally, such “politically smart aid” can be recognised through two overarching strategies. First of all, it is characterised by a strategy of “thinking politically”. In order to be “smart”, donors should first of all obtain a better understanding of the institutional and political dynamics in which they work (Fisher and Marquette 2016). Through, for example, better Political Economic Analysis (PEA), donors can improve their understanding of the political context (the political system, political and bureaucratic leadership and interaction, and the nature of the political settlement), of the sectoral level in which interventions are planned (political significance), and of the organisational and individual characteristics of potential partners (who are reform champions?) (Dasandi, Marquette, and Robinson 2016). Secondly, “working politically” points to applying methods which will enable aid to “go with the grain” of the local context. Indeed, the argument is that, since “domestic political factors are usually much more important in determining developmental impact than the scale of aid funding or the technical quality of programming”, the key is to be more flexible and adaptable in the design and communication of development aid, to multiply and scale up participation in the planning of such aid, and, most importantly, to give “ownership” to local aid recipients in the implementation of the aid objectives (Booth and Unsworth 2014; Teskey 2022). In that regard, commonly cited success factors for “working politically” include the opportunity for local actors to take the lead, close relations between program staff and major interest groups, high-level continuity in staffing, and a general supportive environment within the donor agency (Dasandi et al. 2019; Wild, Kelly, and Roche 2022).

### ***A struggling “orthodoxy”***

Whereas such emphasis on politically smart aid had first been introduced some time around the turn of the century (Carothers and De Gramont 2013), more recently, it is observed to have become part of the mainstream development aid establishment (Dasandi et al. 2019; Hickey and Bukenya 2021), or, as argued by Teskey (2022), it has become a “new orthodoxy”. That being said, literature has observed that the implementation of this orthodoxy often remains rather ambiguous. Similar to Ferguson’s argument of the “anti-politics machine” (2003), international democracy support all too often struggles to break free from technocratic and mechanistic methods of implementation, and thus struggles to “let politics back in”. Indeed, other than prioritising socioeconomic over political objectives, the international democracy support community continues to advocate technical solutions to political problems, to prioritise the role of rational technical experts, and to adhere to rationalistic or economic criteria, such as efficiency and cost-effectiveness (Abegaz 2015; Kurki 2011).

Such difficulties with implementing politically smart aid, however, should also be attributed to the new political aid framework itself, in that it (so far?) fails to deliver on its promises. For example, it has been argued that, because its core purpose is to make the “unknown known”, thus to “mitigate and regulate uncertainty”, it cannot not rely on instruments and methods which explore, map, and bring under control that unknown (Venugopal 2022). In other words, by its very nature it cannot escape technocracy. Moreover, it has also been observed that these instruments are, in fact, incapable of delivering a proper understanding of the underlying rationales of why the partner government agrees to certain aid objectives or not, and this especially in contexts in which donors face recipient authorities who remain uncommitted to core Western donor agendas (Hickey and Bukenya 2021, 13). Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, it has been observed that the political aid framework cannot overcome a dilemma: donors who seek to deliver locally led, politically smart programs will either accept that competing priorities, results, and values will lead to

limiting the extent of true local ownership, or they should be committed to true local leadership and accept that this may well cut against organisational imperatives (Craney and Hudson 2020). For example, in light of such a dilemma – and in particular, in the context of Uganda – it has been observed that political aid instruments often remain highly donor-centric and secretive in nature, and, as such, that they do not allow for sufficient “ownership” and “recipient participation” (Fisher and Marquette 2016, 116).

Faced with such difficulties in pursuing “political aid”, the primary argument has nevertheless been that we must continue to improve the political aid framework itself, both in terms of design and implementation (Dasandi, Marquette, and Robinson 2016, 2019; McCulloch and Piron 2019; Teskey 2022). For example, it has been argued that it could be improved through more evidence-based research and attention to best practices (Wild, Kelly, and Roche 2022), or through making the tools at its disposal more inclusive (Fisher and Marquette 2016, 124). In continuing this path, however, the argument goes that we, nonetheless, should accept that there will always be trade-offs and sacrifices one way or the other (Craney and Hudson 2020), and that the task ahead will entail a “Sisyphian labour that will not have a clean or satisfying end-date” (Venugopal 2022).

### Theoretical considerations

In light of these difficulties that come with pursuing “politically smart” aid, and given the suspension of the DGF, did the DGF then merely fail to properly implement the framework? Also, should we just accept that “political aid” will always be flawed in some ways? In particular, with the donors in Uganda now contemplating what is next for democracy support in Uganda, what should be the lesson learnt? Should they just have trust in this framework, while at the same time seeking to continue to improve it? Like Sisyphus, should they be doomed to push the same stone up the hill over and over again? Here, we would like to challenge such a conclusion. After all, as perfection does not exist, it is always possible to become *smarter*. It is always possible to finetune and improve a given framework. However, what if the framework itself – in this case the turn to “politically smart aid” – is the problem? What if we also question the very frame in which such aid operates?

### Insights from post-development theory

Driven by decolonial theory, post-development literature bluntly rejects “development aid” for simultaneously being a Eurocentric construct and an imperialist project (Ziai 2004). Indeed, the core argument forwarded by this literature is that the construct of “development aid” – *this could just as well be replaced with “democracy support”* – does not align with local understandings of a good society. To the contrary: it creates underdevelopment and, as such, it should be seen as a vehicle to maintain Western influence and dominance. Therefore, rather than improving development aid policies – e.g. through “alternative development” – the entire paradigm of “development” must be rejected in favour of the search for “alternatives to development” that are rooted in local culture and knowledge (Escobar 1995, 215). Rather than accepting that there will be a dilemma between aid objectives and local ownership, this literature argues that there can never be an excuse for such a dilemma; thus that aid objectives should always be aligned to local ownership.

In more general terms, then, post-development literature has strongly sought to criticise the very frame in which international development aid operates. It contests the assumption that Western solutions can solve problems which are located in other areas of the world. As such, in terms of “making development aid more political”, rather than finetuning international intervention, it could be argued that this literature seeks to “politicise” it. It points to the necessity to both rethink the ontological and epistemological positioning of our own research, and to acknowledge and engage alternative ecologies of knowledge. Indeed, a key aim is to recognise and make visible those different ways of imagining, embracing, and enacting ontological diversity as other modes of existence (Klein and Morreo 2019, 4–7).

### **Insights from Africanist literature**

Following up on this call to engage ontological diversity in the context of the present article's argument, the key then is to "desilence" and acknowledge the scientific value of the voices of those most closely related to the reality that we try to understand or operate in, i.e. African alternative visions with regard to aid interventions in the name of democracy (Rutazibwa 2014).

In that regard, it should, first of all, be observed that the key objective of African scholarship on democracy and development – notable scholars include Frantz Fanon, Thomas Sankara, and Claude Ake – has always been to overcome the "non-representation" and "exclusion" of African voices within global development discourse, and aid structure more generally. Indeed, more so than merely calling for equal representation in the quest to solve Africa's problems, these scholars are clear that Africa must solve its own problems and look within for answers. Africa must become more self-reliant and detached from Western influence. Such insistence on self-reliance, non-interference, and African nationalism has also come to dominate the thought of much of Africa's leadership, including Nkrumah of Ghana, Ahmed Sékou Touré of Guinea, Modibo Kéita of Mali, Julius K. Nyerere of Tanzania, and Qaddafi of Libya (Martin 2012).

Secondly, with regard to "democracy" itself, multiple (African) scholars have argued that "African democracy" is very different from Western conceptions. For example, as pointed out by Claude Ake, "[i]f African democracy follows the line of least resistance to Western liberalism, it will achieve only the democracy of alienation" (1993, 244). In contrast to liberal democracy, "African democracy" espouses much more consensual and collective characteristics (Bradley 2005). As again argued by Ake (1993, 241), "[ordinary Africans] see their political empowerment, through democratisation, as an essential part of the process of getting the economic agenda right at last and ensuring that the development project is managed better and its rewards more evenly distributed". Additionally, democracy is also collective because "Africa is still a communal society, and it is this communalism which defines the peoples' perception of self-interest, their freedom and their location in the social whole" (Ake 1993, 243). Delving further into this "collective" aspect of African democracy, we should thus understand that "unity" and "consensus" are manifestations of an imminent approach to social interaction within African societies (Ifeanyi and Etieyibo 2020; Owusu 1992). As such, African scholarship has argued that such forms of social interaction should lead to a rule by consensus, which *could* be characterised by the absence of political parties or partisan politics and the practice of approving the appointment of rulers through consensus (Mkandawire 2001; Osabu-Kle 2000). For example, as argued by Wiredu, a non-party polity – in contrast to a multiparty polity – would be indispensable in maintaining consensus and peace within the ethnic complexities characterising African societies (1996).

Finally, as observed by Schatzberg (2001, 203), an important element in the translation of such understanding of democracy – and political legitimacy, more generally – among the population is the "tacit normative idea that government stands in the same relationship to its citizens as a father does to his children". Whereas many African leaders see themselves as "a father of the nation", Schatzberg shows how such ideas have also become hegemonic within African societies, and thus have become "part of the diffused understanding of common sense" (Schatzberg 2001, 23). According to this "moral matrix", the task of political fathers is to provide, nourish, protect, and discipline. They are to consult and listen to the voices of their metaphorical wives and adult children, but they are considered the ones to make decisions. Therefore, when political leaders behave as "responsible fathers" – if they display the capacity to listen well and to deliver material benefits to their community – they are given political legitimacy and, hence, "it becomes increasingly unthinkable to challenge them. Their political legitimacy and thus the broader stability of the polity are thereby maintained" (Schatzberg 2001, 203).

## Methodology

Following from such a theoretical lens, this paper will problematise the DGF's approach to "political aid" on the basis of a normative critique which takes African knowledge as a central point of departure. In particular, relying on an interpretive research approach (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012) based on semi-structured interviews and document analysis, this article will assess how the DGF's approach to political aid corresponds to local visions of ownership and democracy. Specifically, an in-depth analysis of the 2018–2022 DGF programming document (DGF 2017) and local news reports was complemented with eight semi-structured interviews with DGF managers (two interviews), contract agents (two interviews), and DGF implementing partners (four interviews). Interviews were held online between March and July 2022. Each interview lasted between 1 and 1.5 hours. In line with ethical guidelines as proposed by literature (Fisher 2021, 21; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow 2012, 122), consent was sought from all respondents to transcribe the discussions for subsequent analysis. Due to the sensitivity of the negotiations to reinstate the DGF during that time, as well as the sensitivity of democracy support in an authoritarian context, all respondents have been anonymised. Following desk research of the DGF website, LinkedIn profiles, published newsletters, as well as reporting in local news outlets, respondents were selected on the basis of having either direct experience with implementing DGF II projects, of having first-hand experience with setting up the DGF II, or on the basis of being directly informed about the negotiations to reinstate the program. All interviews followed the same structure: all respondents were asked to first detail their involvement with the DGF; to explain if and how they found the local societal context to be contentious and, if so, how they sought to navigate this in their work; to explain in their own words what they understood to have contributed to the closure of the DGF; and finally, to lay out their proposals for how the international community should proceed with democracy support after 2022.

It is important to note that representatives of the GoU declined to participate in this research. In order to sufficiently grasp the local visions, this paper relied on triangulating alternative sources, including academic literature, newspaper articles, and presidential speeches.

## Assessing the DGF's embrace of politically smart aid

As noted in the introduction, the President of Uganda supposedly closed the DGF because he believed it undermined the GoU's authority under the guise of improving governance, and because he felt that Ugandans had no say in defining the strategic priorities of this fund. As a precondition for lifting the suspension, President Museveni therefore demanded equal representation of GoU in the DGF Board (cf. supra). The DGF Board consists of only the ambassadors of the donor countries. Twice a year it meets with the GoU to discuss progress and challenges of program objectives. Whereas such representation was a precondition to reinstate the DGF (cf. supra), donors have consistently resisted such representation, as it was believed it would have serious repercussions for the functioning of the DGF. For example, according to DGF respondents, it would lead to the Board not being able to openly discuss the state of Ugandan democracy, and thus that it would lead to the DGF not being able to pursue its program objectives (Interviews 1 and 2). Moreover, DGF management considered these claims for equal representation to, in fact, be "irrational" and to serve as a "smoke screen"; to cover for the fact that the DGF is deeply despised as it is a risk on their hold on power (Interview 2). The fact that there was disagreement within the GoU on this issue of representation (*Monitor*, 12 February 2021), and specifically the fact that this issue supposedly only came up in the run up to the 2021 elections, only strengthened this belief.

However, whereas there may indeed be many opportunistic – and perhaps more nefarious – reasons why the president suspended the DGF, and whereas this research did not manage to speak to the president or to a GoU representative, it must nevertheless be considered that such demand for authority, ownership, and representation by the Ugandan president is not irrational.

On the one hand, it has historical precedent. Namely, Uganda was one of the earliest advocates for establishing the “Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness”, which introduced the principles of ownership. In fact, Uganda was the first ever recipient country to ask donors to operate their aid structure within a given national framework, and to align their aid objectives to national priorities (Habraken, Schulpen, and Hoebink 2017).

Additionally, it must also be observed that President Museveni’s discourse on democracy and political legitimacy very much mirrors the African vision as outlined above, and thus that his reasoning points to an ontological difference. For example, literary analysis of President Museveni’s biography has indicated that he often uses biblical references and even likens himself to Jesus Christ (Mutie 2018). In public speeches and interviews, he also frequently portrays himself as the “grandfather” of the nation; as a “presidential monarch” who is the only one capable of bringing prosperity, peace, and even democracy (Tangri and Mwenda 2010). Additionally, he has also always been rather reluctant to multiparty democracy. Instead, as also evident from the name of the ruling party –the National Resistance Movement (NRM) – he (although somewhat ambiguously) understands himself to lead a broad-based “movement”, encouraging the inclusion and participation of all in the name of maintaining peace and developing the country (Makara, Rakner, and Svåsand 2009; Stremmlau 2018, chapter 6). Finally, in terms of defining democracy, Museveni has also often stated that he does not need lectures on democracy because he understands Ugandan democracy to be very different from the West’s. This he made particularly clear during his presidential swearing-in ceremony in 2021, when he stated that “we designed this system not from the air-conditioned rooms but from the jungles of our country where we lived with the people in their huts for much of the 16 years of the resistance” (*The Independent*, 12 May 2021).

It seems, then, that in claiming the GoU’s demands to be irrational, the international donors have not been able to sufficiently acknowledge and engage this different ontological reality, and hence, understand that it serves as a potential cause for the closure. This observation is further strengthened when we also take into account how the DGF sought to implement politically smart aid itself. In translating “politically smart aid”, the DGF zoomed in on the necessity of PEA, as well as on adopting “Problem Driven Iterative Adaptation (PDIA) in conjunction with adaptive programming” (DGF 2017). This stipulates that interventions should be based on locally identified objectives, that a broad range of actors within the government and civil society should be actively engaged, and that there should be an authorising environment for decision-making that encourages “positive deviance and experimentation” (DGF 2017, 33–4).

### **Locally identified objectives**

Whereas the DGF I (2011–2016) programming document still emphasised growth, poverty reduction, rule of law, and long-term stability, the DGF II (2018–2022) programming document narrowed down the areas of intervention to only include “citizens’ engagement in democratic governance and their relationship with the state in upholding citizen rights” (DGF 2017, 16–18). Specifically, these interventions should prioritise the inclusion of women and youths, and they should be organised into three spheres: (i) democratic processes that build citizen-state relationships; (ii) citizen empowerment, engagement, and accountability; and (iii) protection of human rights, access to justice, and gender equality.

Zooming in on the 25 projects within sphere 1 (see Table 1), these projects are specifically concerned with how the state engages with citizens in democratic processes, and how to develop and strengthen coalitions between reform-minded democratic state and non-state actors (DGF 2017, 26). At this stage, it could already be considered that such concern with improving how the state engages with citizens in democratic processes could come across as highly paternalising, and thus that this may be very contentious given the president’s own self-perception as being the “pater” of the nation. That being said, however, respondents nevertheless stated that both the identification and the design of these projects all heavily relied on the input from civil society and

**Table 1.** Sphere 1 projects, source: <https://www.dgf.uq>

Partner	Project title
Alliance for Finance Monitoring	Curbing commercial electoral processes in Uganda
Advocates Coalition for Development and Environment	Local government scorecards
African Leadership Institute	Parliamentary performance scorecard and civic engagement
Alliance of Mayors and Municipal Leaders' Initiative for Community Action on AIDS at the Local Level	Strengthening democratic governance within urban authorities
Akina Mama wa Afrika	Strengthening women's leadership and influence in political processes
Centre for Basic Research	Strengthening evidence-based democratic governance agenda setting and engagement
Centre for Governance and Economic Development	Strengthening private sector in governance and accountability
Centre for Women in Governance	Increasing representation and effective participation of women councillors in decision making processes
Community Integrated Development Initiative	Kampala advocacy project for improved water, sanitation, and hygiene resource allocation
Civil Society Budget Advocacy Group	Promoting inclusive public finance management
Institute for Parliamentary Studies	Capacity development for district local councils
Kituo Cha Katiba	Interrogating electoral justice and reform
Kasese district local government	Empowering communities to demand accountability for enhanced service delivery in Kasese district
Kitgum District Local Government	Promoting representation and participation of youth in democratic governance processes in Kitgum district
Ministry of Lands, Housing, and Urban Development	Deepening good urban governance of urban forums through e-learning platforms in Uganda
Nebbi District Local Government	Empowering and engaging the youth and the Nebbi Youth Council in local governance issues
National Bureau for NGOs	Strengthening the National Bureau to improve civil society health
Netherlands Institute for Multiparty Democracy Uganda	Political Party Capacity Strengthening Project
Parliament of Uganda	Strengthening capacity of the Parliament to exercise its mandate and promote citizens' participation in parliamentary processes
Uganda Joint Christian Council	Scaling up gender responsive budgeting in local government structures
Uganda Women's Media Association	Media for gender equality and social justice
Uganda National NGO Forum	Support to organisational strengthening and participatory people-based advocacy
Uganda Women's Network	Women and youth empowerment for leadership and women's rights
Westminster Foundation for Democracy	Strengthening women and youth participation and representation in Uganda
The Women's International Peace Centre	Promoting women's effective participation in peaceful electoral processes in Uganda

local authorities (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 5). In particular, in contrast to previous programs, such input was collected through conventions in which applicants could voice their views on the issues identified and the ways they could be addressed. Such an approach was appreciated by some stakeholders; as noted by one respondent:

I have told them multiple times in the past that they need to use their ears in the ratio of two to one with regards to their mouth. This time I have seen them listening more to their partners, and talk less. (Interview 5)

However, despite such improvement, it should equally be observed that much of the programmatic scope of the DGF was already set in stone and predefined, and thus that it was not necessarily a response to locally identified objectives. For example, the programmatic scope and areas of intervention of the DGF II were, in fact, first proposed by a European consultancy firm on the basis of both a background analysis of the democratic governance trends in Uganda and an analysis of the social and political prospects for change (Interview 8). In addition, the overarching thematic emphasis of the DGF projects – gender and youths – in fact very much aligns with the priority areas of the different DGF members (Council of the European Union 2020). Yet, such emphasis on youths often does not resonate with the desires of local partners, especially those who try to engage authorities on a more national level. For example, the emphasis on youths was noted to hamper progress

on interparty dialogue, in particular because local stakeholders wanted to focus on other issues (Interview 7).

### **Engaging a broad range of stakeholders**

The DGF programming document also points attention to the need to actively engage a broad range of actors in order to ensure that changes are viable, legitimate, relevant, and supportable (DGF 2017, 34). On the one hand, the emphasis on “engaging a broad range of actors” is meant to find a better balance between engaging civil society and GoU actors, but also, on the other hand, between more diverse GoU stakeholders (Interview 1). At the same time, however, partners should also be selected on the basis of being “agents of change” and “champions”, i.e. “those partners and institutions that will have the capacity, engagement and incentive to transform the interventions into real impact in line with the DGF target areas” (DGF 2017, 17–23). The DGF, then, does not want to partner with just anyone, in particular with regard to the GoU.

For example, “champions” among Ugandan authorities were often only understood to be located at the very local levels. While it was acknowledged that local authorities often only approached the DGF in terms of its financial resources – as observed by one respondent: “[these subnational authorities] look at those interventions as a gap feeder of some sort” (Interview 5) – these subnational levels were nevertheless often understood to be “laboratories for democracy”, and relationships with local authorities and district officials were described to be very cordial (Interviews 1, 2, 4, 6). By contrast, it was noted that such champions were difficult to look for at the level of national government due to the fact that the GoU was often perceived not to be interested in discussing democratic progress. For example, it was frequently remarked that GoU interlocutors likely did not read the DGF reports which were presented to them, nor that they were interested in attending meetings because the DGF did not provide for allowances and attendance fees (Interviews 1, 2). Moreover, the GoU was also believed to deliberately frustrate the workings of the DGF, either by instituting anti-democratic policies or by “putting spokes in the wheels” of the DGF itself (Interview 2). This became especially apparent in the run-up to the 2021 elections. During that time, for example, the DGF and its staff increasingly became targets of Ugandan tabloids, who are believed to have close relations with the GoU (Interview 2). Most commonly, these newspapers sought to defame and blame DGF staff for corruption and mismanagement and for supporting the opposition. At one point, some were even blamed for managing “sex syndicates” (*Red Pepper*, 26 August 2020; *Mulengera*, 31 August 2020). Also, the context was such that the GoU increasingly targeted local NGOs involved with governance, rule of law, human rights issues, or anti-corruption related work. Many of these were also direct partners of the DGF (Interview 3; see also *Monitor*, 15 August 2019).

### **Facing deviance**

Finally, we must also assess how the DGF sought to engage risk and deviance in the implementation of its projects. According to the DGF’s “Risk Management Framework”, serious contextual, institutional, or reputational risks relative to the spheres and specific areas of intervention should not be considered to be part of the “programmatic” but of the “political level”. This entails that these types of risks should be dealt with by representatives from the different funding member states’ embassies, not the DGF staff themselves. In their assessment of how the embassies have dealt with these risks, it was especially such “political support” that the DGF management perceived to be insufficient. For example, it was noted that embassies often downplayed the seriousness of the GoU’s provocations – e.g. the tabloid stories, the GoU crackdown on NGOs, etc. – thereby maintaining “a tendency to neutrally regard [these provocations] as if they were in any way a reasonable position, and thus should also require a reasonable response” (Interview 2). As observed by another respondent:

There was a belief that – and this is true for a lot of people also in civil society – this would all be over after the elections. However, I told them this is the new normal. There is a significant paradigm shift. [...] But everyone I talked with ultimately negated this. (Interview 3)

On the other hand, as to coping with non-fundamental risks, the DGF II programming document stipulates that interventions should, in fact, be embedded within an organisational culture that allows taking considered risks, i.e. being imbedded within an “authorising environment” that encourages “problem driven *positive* deviance and experimentation” (DGF 2017, 33–4, emphasis mine). Crucial to managing such positive deviance within each sphere is the appointment of a “learning manager” who acts as a “thought leader” on the particular governance issues specific to each sphere. The task of these “thought leaders” is to “drive forward how the program is implemented, how they can facilitate a coming together of different stakeholders, who and what is to be funded, and how analysis and learning is conducted” (DGF 2017, 22). When confronted with a changing context, it is their task to convene different DGF staff across the different spheres, which would allow for the examination of different issues from multiple perspectives.

In assessing this risk framework, however, we should observe that the DGF was institutionally not sufficiently equipped to engage fundamental deviance. Namely, the “thought leaders” across the difference spheres were mostly Western nationals, schooled in Western ideas of what constitutes good governance and democracy. As such, they are *probably* less inclined to acknowledge the ontological differences that may lie at the core of “deviance” to be legitimate. In fact, even if they were inclined to do so, the institutional set-up for dealing with deviance would have made this difficult. After all, the risk framework only encouraged them to look for *positive* deviance, i.e. *opportunities* through which the local context could add to the stated program directives, rather than subtract from it. Also, dealing with the more *negative* deviance was primarily the task of embassies, not the DGF management, thus not subject to the implementation of the political aid framework.

Finally, the failure to properly engage deviance or ontological diversity is also demonstrated when we consider how the DGF strategic vision was legitimised. Notably, the DGF II programming document only “*assumes*” that the vision behind DGF II resonates strongly with the GoU and with civil society and other non-state actors (DGF 2017, 18, emphasis mine). Such assumption was based on the GoU’s own commitment to democracy as expressed in the constitution of Uganda and as expressed in other policy documents (e.g. Vision 2040 and the National Development Plan II). Yet, such assumption was never directly checked with the GoU itself during the design of the DGF (Interview 8) and, moreover, as already stated above, such close engagement with the GoU was also lacking more generally. For example, shouldn’t the DGF have pressed harder for the GoU to actually read the reports or attend meetings? As such, and returning to the commonly cited success factors of implementing the new orthodoxy (cf. *supra*), it seems the DGF has also not maintained close enough relations with “major interest groups”.

## Discussion: what future for political aid?

At this stage it should be mentioned that, in addition to the risks and “frustrations” stated above, even prior to the suspension, the DGF II was, in fact, physically impeded in the implementation of its political aid framework. In particular, in 2019, one year into the start of the new program, key DGF managers resigned, including the learning manager. Additionally, due to corruption scandals, the DGF also had to cut ties with key local partners who were tasked with preparing election observation missions and civic education programs in the run-up to the 2021 elections (Interviews 1, 2, 3). As a consequence, given these discontinuities in staff and implementing partners, preparations for some interventions had to be postponed, and then later rushed. Also, the DGF could rely less on local expertise in implementing some interventions (Interview 2, 3). Finally, in August 2020, the new

learning manager, as well as other international democracy aid workers, were also expelled or barred from returning to the country (*Monitor*, 23 November 2020).

That being said, however, it should nevertheless be concluded that the DGF sought to do what it was supposed to do, as dictated by the new aid orthodoxy. Indeed, in contrast to a general European trend of pursuing “developmental” democracy aid (cf. *supra*), in narrowing down the areas of intervention, it seems the DGF II has sought to rejuvenate the pursuit of “political objectives”. Moreover, despite the different “frustrations” which might have complicated the full implementation of the “politically smart” methodology (cf. *supra*), it seems that the DGF has, nevertheless, attempted to implement this methodology as well as possible (Interviews 1, 2), and thus that it also has replicated its flaws. Namely, it can be observed that the DGF is yet another case study of how the adoption of the politically smart methodology does not lead to questioning the dilemma between ownership and aid imperatives (cf. *supra*). To the contrary, the analysis above has made clear that, rather than questioning the imperatives of aid itself – the substance and infrastructure of aid – the underlying rationale of this politically smart orthodoxy is to make the implementation of aid more effective. Indeed, in implementing “politically smart aid”, the DGF – as per its theory of change – departed from an overall (Western) idea of what democracy should be, and from there it selected the best partners (“champions”) and avenues in order to best facilitate those transformative processes of change. DGF management, however, did not question the legitimacy of their own organisation (question of representation) nor the legitimacy of their conception of democracy. The methodology did not lead the DGF to fundamentality assess how the concepts of ownership, democracy, and representation were locally given meaning and legitimised.

In other words, the case study has again made clear that the politically smart methodology only allows engagement on the programmatic level (see also Craney and Hudson 2020). It does not allow acknowledgement and engagement of ontological diversity. Yet, following up on post-development and Africanist arguments, it is exactly such capacity to rethink the ontological differences at the core of the debate on democracy and representation within the DGF that is demanded if continued international intervention is to be legitimate in any way. Moreover, regardless of these theoretical demands, it is also demanded by new developments. The fact of the matter is that the GoU’s demand for ownership is not going to change: to the contrary. Following the closure of the DGF, for example, the GoU further ramped up its efforts to reel in “donor dollars”. Instead of having funds remitted directly to agencies implementing projects in the communities, the GoU has issued a new directive stating that all donor funds must now be channelled through the Treasury, with all donor-funded projects and programs also to be reported to and signed off by the ministry of Finance prior to implementation (*Monitor*, 23 October 2021). It is important to note here that such increased restrictions on international democracy aid interventions are not unique to the Ugandan context (Bouchet, Godfrey, and Youngs 2022; Dupuy, Ron, and Pakash 2016), or that ontological differences are unique to the case of Uganda or Africa. For example, it has equally been argued that democracy is understood fundamentally differently in Latin America (Whitehead 2010), the Arab countries (Sadiki 2004), China (Hu 2018), etc.

Therefore, if the international community is to maintain a forum to exchange ideas on democracy in Uganda *and beyond*, it must adopt a fundamentally different understanding of what it means to think and work politically. Rather than finetuning existing political aid framework, it must abolish it. It must reject the dilemma between ownership and aid objectives, and embrace the claim that true ownership requires the reconceptualisation of what constitutes democratic priorities and values, and that such reconceptualisation is legitimate. In other words, it must embrace the reality that the turn to “thinking and working politically” cannot be limited to the operational or programmatic level alone, but that it must involve questioning the ontological level as well. These two levels cannot be separated.

This, then, brings us to the question: how can this be done? Wary not to pour new wine in old bottles (Ziai 2016), and borrowing from Onar and Nicolaïdis (2013) – whose own typology is imbedded within postcolonial thought – we end with proposing three initial steps through which

international donors can demythologise parts of Western storytelling, and can de-silence marginalised voices. First of all, donors should start to unpack the “assumptions and paradigms that underpin [their] Eurocentric truth claims” (Onar and Nicolaidis 2013, 286). If donors choose to revive the DGF in some form, they should ponder the following questions: What is it exactly that the DGF wanted to achieve, and why? Why was it assumed that the vision behind DGF II resonated with the local context? Was such vision not more a reflection of the donors’ own experience? If this is the case, has the DGF ever truly been fit for purpose? Secondly, equal representation of local stakeholders within the decision-making structures should be the bare minimum. In the case of the DGF, let Ugandan civil society and government partners be represented within the Board itself, as well as within day-to-day management. Let Ugandan (or African) scholars, practitioners, and activists be the “thought leaders” within the different spheres. At least, these measures would provide for a better institutional setting to have an ontological debate – and thus lead to a more informed understanding – on how to engage the political context. Finally, in order to *effectively* have such debate, donors should also make sure to engage “the other” on their own terms. They must make sure to take “seriously their ‘facts’ and ‘values’ about the world, while seeking to understand how Eurocentric legacies may condition such engagement” (Onar and Nicolaidis 2013, 291). Such acknowledgement of ontological diversity, however, won’t prevent the president from ever frustrating democracy support again. Yet, when this happens, because such aid would operate on the basis of shared ontological foundations, it would allow effective challenging of the *rationality* of such actions.

Granted, despite only being initial steps, they are arguably still a far cry from being feasible. After all, as development aid all too often either remains intent on sustaining itself or is used a tool to further Western interests (Escobar 1995), it is unlikely that it will sufficiently allow “non-Western” voices to dictate the aid imperatives; hence, the aforementioned dilemma. However, it must, nevertheless, be noted that such post-development and decolonial critique is gradually finding a place in mainstream discussions on European foreign policy as well. Indeed, increasingly, the core assumptions of development and democracy aid have become contested by policy-makers, activists, observers, and researchers inside and outside of Europe (Orbie et al. 2023; Ziai 2017). Will this trend continue? In the case of the international donors in Uganda, as they have already proven to be capable to adapt to the changes of the time, will they now again follow suit? In any case, given the closure of DGF II, the prospect of having to build from scratch offers a welcome window of opportunity.

## Concluding remarks

In light of the suspension and closure of the DGF, this paper sought to ask whether the DGF has merely improperly implemented the “politically smart orthodoxy” or whether there is, in fact, something more amiss with the orthodoxy as such. Analysis has found that, whereas there may be some questions as to the proper implementation of the orthodoxy, the case study of the DGF in Uganda in fact proves to be another example of how this aid framework fails to sufficiently understand and engage the political context. Indeed, the key takeaway is that the thinking and working politically framework does not allow engagement in fundamental contestation on the very concepts that define intervention. After all, analysis has demonstrated the different ways in which the DGF, through the implementation of the political aid framework, has failed to consider local demands for representation, ownership, and democracy. Because this political aid framework is limited to only operate at the programmatic level, not the level of ontology – and in contrast to current literature, which has argued in favour of merely improving the political aid framework – this paper has argued for its abolishment.

In presenting this analysis, this paper has relied on a normative critique, which takes African knowledge as a central point of departure. On this basis, it could be argued that it has replaced Western-centred truth claims with African-centred ones. Yet, does such “alternative centring” truly

solve the problems of Western-centred research? For example, it has equally been argued that a decolonial and post-development theoretical approach also risks generalising and romanticising alternative modes of existence, and thus insufficiently reflects those local complexities (Pieterse 2000; Storey 2000). This is a valid concern, and therefore I encourage further research to more closely assess how the GoU discursively translates these African ideals of ownership and democracy; to assess how this translation compares to these ideals; and to more fundamentally reflect on how these ideals are also translated among the population and civil society at large. Answering these questions is indispensable if we are to reconstruct an alternative framework to democracy support in Uganda. That being said, the point in engaging and de-silencing these alternative voices was never to go as far as to embrace them uncritically. However, the point was also not to “dismiss them as romantic expositions by intellectuals who see in the realities they observe only what they want to see” (Escobar 1995, 170). By highlighting them, I hope to enhance their existence and viability, thus to give voice to diversity and to politicise alternative visions for the future. Such hope is rooted in a political conviction that issues pertaining to “political aid” or the DGF in particular cannot be solved within the existing aid framework. As such, far from taking these alternatives as an end point, the acknowledgement of these alternatives should, rather, be seen as a first step in the creation of a new agenda for research, dialogue, and action that can.

### List of interviews

- (1) DGF manager, 8 March 2022
- (2) DGF manager, 1 February 2022
- (3) International democracy aid worker, 23 February 2022
- (4) Local implementing partner, 27 June 2022
- (5) Local implementing partner, 21 June 2022
- (6) Local implementing partner, 27 June 2022
- (7) International implementing partner, 27 June 2022
- (8) Western consultancy firm, 1 July 2022

### Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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