

F2F meeting of the SDC thematic network on democratization, decentralization, local governance (ddlgn) in Pemba, Mozambique, 14.06-19.06 2015:

Brief report

Objectives and programme

SDC's DDLG network has grown over the years into a very active thematic network within SDC with considerable outreach. Face-to-face meetings play an important role in virtual networks, complementing the electronic exchange with personal contacts among members and beyond. The idea of the meeting in Pemba (the fourth in the life of DDLGN) was to link up with a regional workshop on accountability organized by the East and South Africa Division (ESAD), with the objective to learn from each other. Main objectives of the f2f were to improve relevant knowledge of SDC staff and partners, raise awareness for expertise and support available within and beyond the network, connect with and learn from the knowhow and experience of peers, and discuss about the network's future agenda.

68 members of the network (SDC staff from headquarters and SCOs, representatives of implementing partners, and experts) found their way to Pemba. SDC's regional divisions (East Asia, South Asia, CIS, Western Balkans, East and South Africa, Western Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean) were all represented. However, due to logistic challenges, some DDLGN members particularly from Latin America and the Western Balkans were not able to reach Pemba. The participants contributed very actively to the five-days-programme (for details of the programme, presentations and impressions www.f2f-ddlgn.net). The thematic focus was on accountability (conceptual issues, support to parliaments, «actors of local democracy») and fiscal transfers in a decentralized system. The programme's methodology focused on a mix of expert inputs and discussion among peers, mainly based on SDC examples that were presented by participants.

Key conclusions and lessons drawn by the Focal Point and the Core group

Good balance between expert inputs and group discussions: Most participants were very satisfied with the methodological approach mixing expert inputs, individual and group reflections and providing opportunities for discussion based on concrete cases.

The discussion around **concrete examples** presented by SDC staff from SCOs and headquarters (within a given conceptual framework) was instrumental **for triggering peer learning and reflection:** While raising awareness about differences and similarities, challenges and opportunities in the different contexts, they were seen as sources of inspiration and knowhow to be used in other contexts. New contacts were made to transfer expertise and knowledge from one SCO to another. While the DDLGN will continue to offer virtual platforms for exchange, the learning from concrete examples was perceived as very useful and the idea of facilitating study visits to intensify the peer learning in a more tangible way was raised.

Active involvement and committed contributions: Almost all participants were actively involved in the programme, as expert presenters, panelists, facilitators, or reporters. It was said by various participants that the participatory preparatory process led by the Focal Point team together with the core group and the involvement of several DDLGN members proved to be very successful both, with

regard to the thematic as well as methodological learning of participants. Though at times a bit heavy it was worth the investment and it will contribute to motivate network members to continue their engagement in the ongoing virtual exchange within the network.

Visibility of expertise and experience within network: The f2f made clear that there is a great wealth of knowhow, experience, commitment, in-depth reflection and innovation available among SCOs (particularly through specialised NPOs participating), headquarters, and partners. This makes it particularly worthwhile to invest in peer learning.

The short **field visit** was seen as useful despite of the limited time available particularly because it was embedded in the thematic topics of the f2f. It served the purpose of «a glimpse of reality» of the host country, and helped establishing the nexus from prior discussions of «accountability» to the subsequent topic of «fiscal transfers». Participants were able to engage in vivid discussions and reflections about what they had seen in the district offices and villages, based on the conceptual framework provided by the f2f discussions the days before.

Relevant selection of themes: The thematic focus of the f2f (accountability, parliamentary assistance, «actors in local democracy», fiscal transfers, including in fragile and conflict affected situations) seems to be very relevant in the practical work of the DDLGN members, and the discussions about how these issues are taken up in the various SDC country programmes were assessed to be very useful by many participants. The joint reflection on the various topics, the discussions on concepts and examples helped to learn from opportunities and challenges in other contexts and frame the concrete learning for one's own programme.

- The various practical possibilities and levels to support mechanisms of **accountability** – one of the key principles of good governance – were presented in a systemic and conceptual framework that was assessed as helpful by many participants to reflect and structure their own approach at project, programme and portfolio level. With regard to **parliamentary assistance** participants reported an increased understanding of the issues at stake as well as the various approaches and entry points that are promising. Under the heading of «**actors in democracy**», a learning project of the DDLGN, participants learned to look more systematically at a variety of informal actors that may play an important role in accountability and decision-making. This ongoing learning project will be further developed and its conceptual approach refined.
- The presentations and discussions around fiscal transfers helped participants to get an understanding of the various design options of **fiscal transfers to the subnational level**. The discussions contributed to raise awareness that there is no magic formula and fiscal transfers need to be seen from a systemic perspective: Fiscal transfers may serve a variety of purposes that are not always converging (such as setting up basic state structures, or enhancing good governance performance of state institutions, or their targeting of most disadvantaged groups), and they are closely linked to the overall decentralization framework assigning tasks and responsibilities in a multilevel governance system. The building up of accountability mechanisms is key.

Benefits and downsides of the back-to-back organization with the regional workshop of ESAD: The antecedent regional workshop on social accountability provided a useful entry point for the subsequent introduction of the systemic accountability perspective during the f2f. Both events

helped participants from the region to better conceptualize current ESAD approaches and to share this experience with the wider network during discussion among peers (ESAD as one of the five case presenters). Travelling for participants from the region could be combined which facilitated their broad representation. And last but not least, the insights into a system of de-concentration rather than decentralization in Mozambique provided interesting learning how to work under such conditions. However, the travel logistic was too complicated to weight these benefits and for the next f2f a more convenient location for all will be sought.

Language barriers: During the event spontaneous arrangements were sought to accommodate francophone group discussion and to provide some translation during plenary discussion. For the next f2f similar arrangements shall be organized more systematically in advance.

How can the f2f learning be institutionally anchored?

The Focal Point and the Core Group plan for a series of follow-up activities:

- Information to the operational divisions of SDC headquarters: Presentation of key learning, concepts and standards, discussion about specific entry points (using the spaces available, by Focal Point and Core Group members);
- Detailed report of f2f and standard PPT presentation to SCOs and regional advisors, to support their dissemination of key messages (Focal Point);
- Follow-up in the context of PCM milestones Core Group members are involved in (Core group members);
- Sensitize SCO management to refer to f2f learning in their annual reporting and planning and in upcoming credit proposals – where appropriate (Core group members and participants from SCOs).

After the f2f 2015: DDLGN's future thematic agenda

Participants expressed interest to further deepen understanding in actual thematic priorities and suggested additional new topics:

Deepening of current topics:

- **Accountability** (refining the concept and elaborate a brief position paper; impact hypotheses & monitoring; best practice and evidence of impact; how to support specific accountability actors such as media, parliaments, informal actors, CSOs; how to address corruption);
- **Fiscal decentralization** (core training, good practice in budget support to subnational governments, clarity about PFM related to local governments);

New topics:

- **Land rights** (legal framework and policies incl. relation between modern and customary rules, how to promote access and user rights, in specific sectors);
- **Decentralization in fragile and conflict affected situations;**
- **Local economic development** (impact of assignment of tasks and revenues on LED, role of subnational governments in LED, link with cadaster/land policy).

Last but not least, the DDLGN focal point will continue to have the responsibility to work on issues of **mainstreaming governance** in SDC's work in general. This task will be completed in the follow-up-

process of the external evaluation on mainstreaming governance in SDC that was accomplished in 2014. A series of suggestions were made by participants on how this could be done (e.g. elaboration of guidance, focused learning on the aspect of inclusion in governance)

The focal point team together with the DDLGN core group will take this wealth of ideas and suggestions back to office and plan on this basis the DDLGN agenda for the years to come in more detail. Thereby certain choices will need to be made according to available resources and commitments by the DDLGN members, and sequencing will be necessary.