



## International Democracy Assistance: Key Lessons

What are the main challenges facing incipient democratic regimes in the developing world and how can donors best support democratisation in these countries? A recent report from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) argues that incomplete democratisation processes and the predominance of 'hybrid regimes' pose serious challenges to the sustainability, capacity, responsiveness and effectiveness of democratic institutions.

Due to the combination of low state capacity and low human development, poor countries pose novel challenges for external democracy promotion and protection – ranging from options for party financing and organisation, to political and civic culture, to the types of social structures prevalent in situations of widespread poverty, which are mostly patronage-driven. A major conclusion from the report is that in order to be sustainable, democratisation impulses need to come from within. External actors have a positive role to play in efforts to

strengthen democratic structures, but they cannot act as substitutes when domestic support is lacking. Donors must therefore support active domestic constituents to be effective and must be realistic and humble about what donor support can achieve.

Over the past two decades, democratisation processes have emerged in many low-income countries - in contradiction to earlier modernisation theory which held that democratisation was only possible

above a certain level of development. Within the international community a consensus has developed holding that considerations of national sovereignty should not shelter a country's internal political arrangements from outside observation or criticism. The international community is therefore seen to have a legitimate interest in promoting and supporting democracy abroad. As a result, international support to democratic change and political reform in developing countries emerged as a key area of support within

the international aid community in the early 1990s. Governments, multilateral organisations, national and international non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are all actively engaged in democracy assistance. Democracy assistance responds to a variety of foreign government motivations and interests, including foreign policy, security, geopolitical, humanitarian, diplomatic and developmental goals. A rough estimate is that approximately US\$2 billion were allocated to democracy-related projects annually at the turn of the millennium. Three decades of democracy assistance have yielded important lessons that seldom find their way outside the reports of the funding agencies. Numerous 'grey reports' offer significant insights that may important to improve current practices. Based on a study commissioned by Irish Aid, this brief summarises key lessons.

**Democracy promotion:**

- Elections and electoral systems (voter education, technical assistance, support to electoral management bodies)
- Institution-building (judicial reform, anti-corruption agencies, support to parliaments and various watch dog institutions)
- Civil society (NGOs, the media and political parties)

**Democracy assistance is political**

Democracy assistance is inherently political. Democratisation is a process that seeks to change the distribution of power between social groups. By empowering one set of institutions and actors over others, donors can shape internal power dynamics, especially in poor, aid recipient societies.

Donors have been reluctant to acknowledge that development-concerns cannot be divorced from politics. Donors have only to a limited degree supported political parties arguing that it would represent a direct involvement in domestic political processes. Instead they have preferred to view their interventions as mainly technocratic. Donors need to affirm the political nature of democracy promotion.

**Build linkages between political parties and civil society organisations**

The international community needs to address the imbalance between assistance to political parties and assistance to civil society. So far, most of the funds have gone to non governmental organisations (NGOs) and partly as a result, political parties have become marginalised. Donors should not think in terms of either/or, but rather develop strategies that strengthen both NGOs, media and political parties and the synergies between them.



**Democracy assistance must be sensitive to context**

In areas such as support to the judiciary, there is a widespread perception that democracy assistance is based on idealised Western notions of democratic governance beyond the reach even of the most advanced democracies in the North. Donors tend to promote the same reform templates without adjusting their programmes to the political, social and economic power relations in the recipient countries. Very often, donor activities lack flexibility and are not responsive to priorities defined in country. Evaluations show that donor-assisted democratic reform projects at times over-estimate the capacity of political systems to absorb transplanted democratic institutions and policies. This inattention to context often results in an undue emphasis on formal, as opposed to substantial, change.

**Support to hybrid regimes: a key challenge for democracy assistance**

Ensuring continued progress after 'founding' elections is often much more challenging than the transition to democracy itself. Overtime, international democracy assistance has therefore been geared towards strengthening the institutions of accountability – the electoral channel, legislature, the judicial system, special institutions of constraint and local government. One of the paradoxes of such assistance is that executive dominance has remained strong in many developing countries. The general tendency to support and rely on incumbent regimes, may itself contribute to this entrenchment of power within the executive and undermine other efforts at strengthening domestic accountability mechanisms.

Democratisation assistance is still not sufficiently adapted to the challenging contexts of democratisation processes which are often either stuck, or at risk of breakdown. It is too standardised, still frequently focuses on elections rather than on wider structural and institutional changes, and seeks results too quickly.

Democracy assistance needs to focus on strengthening and formalising the rules governing executive powers and duties, the legislature, the judiciary and civil service. The aim should be to develop the independence and the capacity of other government branches and thus to strengthen the horizontal accountability mechanisms. At both the national and the local levels, democracy assistance should also seek to improve transparency and identify innovative ways of strengthening the autonomy and capacity of oversight institutions such as information agencies and ombudsmen.

However, as it currently stands, international democracy assistance does not meet the challenge of strengthening democratic structures in hybrid regimes, especially in poor countries. There is a need for more integrated thinking and comprehensive approaches. In its current form(s), democracy assistance is characterised by considerable organisational and thematic fragmentation. For example, democracy promoters care about promoting civil and political liberties, but they have paid relatively little attention to other closely related issues, such as corruption. Wider concerns such as poverty and inequality, state capacity, or the nature of the aid relationship

have found little resonance among organisations involved in democracy assistance.

### Engagement with a variety of actors, also those outside the 'comfort zone'

One significant way to counter the tendency toward executive dominance noted above is for donors to cast their nets wide and engage with a wide variety of actors. The international community has already made considerable progress in this direction, as attested in its efforts to support civil society, strengthen the judiciary, and to foster a free, independent, and responsible media.

Donors have tended to give primacy to some actors over others, and have not fully engaged with groups that may represent useful entry points for international democracy assistance. The need to work with civil society across all levels (central, regional, local) is increasingly recognised, but donors are still struggling to translate this commitment into practice. In general, the international community needs to do more to reach out to actors in the rural areas and to groups mistakenly perceived to be too political or militant. These organisations include traditional organisations like trade unions, farmers' unions, and faith-based groups, and, as noted above, political parties on which any democratisation processes hinge.

### Balance donor goals with policy coherence

The relationship between democratisation and the broader governance agenda is complex and sometimes pull in different directions. Democracy assistance takes place alongside the pursuit of other foreign policy objectives. There can be contradictions between security and other foreign policy interests on the one hand, and democratisation and good governance interests on the other.

Donors must prioritise and sequence their ambitions in order to avoid 'overloading' societies and governance systems with constant changes and demands both in their democracy assistance and in their good governance programmes. Furthermore, virtually no existing evaluation efforts have addressed the wider issues that are of particular concern in low income countries, such as inquiring how democratisation support relates not only to political and civil freedoms but also to other important goals such as containing corruption, or developing

better public policies to address poverty and inequality, or making the state more effective. Moving along the 'chain of causality' towards such wider issues is particularly challenging for evaluations; and currently the foundations in terms of knowing what works even with respect to more immediate goals is weak. In addition, for low income countries, it is especially important to evaluate democratisation assistance in a context of high 'aid dependency'.

Democratisation assistance focuses primarily on strengthening executive and legislative institutions to help them be inclusive, broadly participatory, open, fair, transparent, and accountable. However, particularly in poor countries, weak state capacity and weak professional capacity among non-governmental actors, often represent a major problem. Freedom and other forms of political liberalisation need to increase alongside an expansion of state capacities and a framework of (formal) institutions that can adequately channel and contain those freedoms.

### Addressing conflicts between long-term processes of democracy and the need for results

Donors need to accept the fact that strengthening democratic governance requires a long-term commitment. Building democracy is necessarily a prolonged and non-linear process. This calls for patience and willingness to accept setbacks. However, because of the pressure to show 'results', donors continue to pursue forms of democracy promotion which are short-term (focused on elections but less on the strengthening of other key institutions), and/or involve frequent changes in policy direction. Donors need to come to terms with the potential tensions that arise in the kinds of assistance that they provide and their very different time horizons.

### The sustainability of external interventions

The sustainability of many donor interventions remains a concern. For example, while it is relatively easy and cheap to set up an NGO, establishing an association that speaks on behalf of a certain constituency and has an impact on policy formulation is far more time-consuming and requires long-term commitment.

Donor assistance has succeeded in changing the organisational landscape of many countries, but it is less clear whether democracy assistance has succeeded in stimulating the emergence and/or further development of an active and vibrant home-grown civil society. Donors have much work to do in terms of strengthening domestic civil society organisations so that they become sustainable and self-sufficient. Donors should also be more sensitive to the fact that extensive reliance on International NGOs may itself undermine the capacity and sustainability of domestic NGOs. As demonstrated by the PRSP experiences, INGOs are usually better placed than the domestic ones in terms of acquiring a voice and influencing policy processes. This may disadvantage home-grown civic organisations.

### Democratisation assistance must be harmonised

There is a considerable need for donors to promote harmonisation and alignment if democracy assistance is to become more effective. This remains a challenge, both within donors' individual programmes as well as in their collective efforts. Donor fragmentation and lack of alignment with country priorities tend to undermine already weak institutions, especially in hybrid regimes. This in turn has important implications for the overall governance and state capacity, and ultimately for the effectiveness of the aid.



This brief is based on the report *'Democratization's Third Wave and the Challenges of Democratic Deepening: Assessing International Democracy Assistance and Lessons Learned'*  
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In the area of judicial reform, for instance, it is essential not to 'import' mutually contradictory institutions and legal rules from different sources. Similarly, in other areas (e.g. assistance to parliaments, political parties, media, etc.) it is important to provide assistance that is well-adapted to country circumstances, and that enables country ownership of reforms. Furthermore, to date, various forms of democratisation support – in particular support to political parties and to elections – have often remained separate from general development assistance. While the involvement of specialised actors such as party foundations or election observation missions may be beneficial, these should be linked to the broader efforts to support development (especially in a context where the latter is becoming more 'politically aware').

### Good Governance, Aid Modalities and Poverty Reduction

This two-year research programme (2006-07) was commissioned by the Advisory Board for Irish Aid. It is being undertaken by a consortium including ODI, CMI and the Economic and Social Research Foundation of Tanzania, with inputs from the German Development Institute, the Centre for Democratic Development of Ghana and researchers in Mozambique, Uganda and Malawi.

The research aims to clarify the relations between governance and poverty reduction and within this context to explore the contributions and risks associated with new aid modalities (sector programmes and budget support).

The programme is a mixture of desk work and targeted field research.

For more information, see:  
[www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)

### More research and evaluations of democratisation assistance

International actors have invested substantially in promoting democratic developments around the world. However, knowledge about the long-term effects of democracy assistance remains limited. One reason for the dearth of accessible knowledge are the numerous challenges involved in evaluating democracy promotion. In particular, it is difficult to attribute success or failure to a specific democracy promotion effort, given that (i) the general impact of these programmes depends on a host of other internal and external influences; (ii) the effects of democracy assistance programmes may not be fully apparent for years; (iii) democratic processes are interlinked with other social, economic, political and historical processes and conditions; and (iv) quantitative indicators can only capture this reality to a limited extent.

Donor agencies have begun to evaluate their democracy promotion projects, but substantive evaluations of donor programmes which cut across their multiple activities remain relatively scarce. For the most part, evaluations tend to focus on specific projects in particular

countries; while more systematic evaluations that are either thematic (e.g. assistance to media) or that comprise a review of a range of interventions and their impact on a country's democratisation dynamics are extremely rare. Evaluations are usually not published. Rarely has the accumulated knowledge been compiled into retrospective learning exercises allowing sharing of experiences across agencies. As a result, while the 'menu' of democracy assistance has evolved, efforts to share knowledge of best practices and lessons have remained few. Moving towards more systematic and better evaluations is challenging because information is scattered and currently no institution has a mandate to assess the impact of international democracy assistance overall is still lacking.

With a few notable exceptions, the academic community has not stepped in to fill this gap. Democracy assistance is poorly represented in scholarly titles. Developing evaluation methods to assess the deepening and consolidation of democratisation (which, compared with the initial triggering/installing of democracy is much less directly observable) seems particularly important.

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