



Assessing international democracy assistance: Key lessons and challenges

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Key points

- The central challenge for international democracy assistance is how to support 'hybrid' regimes
- The relationship between democratisation and 'good governance' can be complex, with the two at times pulling in opposite directions
- Donors need to recognise the tensions between long-term processes of democracy and the need for quick results

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In 2006-2007, the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) and the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) carried out a study on international democracy assistance – or donor efforts to help build and/or strengthen democratic governance in developing countries undergoing democratic transitions – as part of a broader project on 'Good Governance, Aid Modalities and Poverty Reduction' commissioned by Irish Aid. This Project Briefing summarises the key findings of that study. It provides a broad overview of the democratisation processes that have swept across Africa, Asia, and Latin America since the 1980s, and highlights some of the main lessons and implications for international democracy assistance to inform future donor practice.

Democracy's Third Wave and its limitations

Over the past three decades, democratisation processes have brought about a remarkable transformation in the developing world. According to Freedom House there were 41 democracies among the existing 150 states in 1974. By 2006, 123 of the world's 192 states were considered 'electoral democracies'. From the beginning of this so-called Third Wave, democ-

ratism has been a prominent issue in international policy-making and many bilateral and multilateral organisations, as well as national and international non-governmental organisations, have strived to support democracy.

Yet, in the new millennium, the 'democratic optimism' linked to the global triumph of democracy has given way to more sober appraisals about the health of democratic systems in the developing world. Initial expectations that countries experiencing democratic transitions would move in a linear fashion towards consolidated, institutionalised democracies have not been met. Instead, most of these countries now occupy a precarious middle ground between outright authoritarianism and full-fledged democracy, while a number of others has experienced (partial) reversals to authoritarianism (see Table 1). These 'hybrid regimes', combining authoritarian traits with some features of a democracy, sit at the heart of more or less weak states and have become increasingly common, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Why democracy assistance?

Democracy assistance responds to a variety of foreign government and donor motivations and interests, including foreign policy, security,

Table 1: Classification of regimes in sub-Saharan Africa and Latin America, 1972 and 2005

	1972			2004		
	Autocracies	Hybrid regimes	Democracies	Autocracies	Hybrid regimes	Democracies
Sub-Saharan Africa	25	9	2	15	17	10
Latin America and Caribbean	4	9	7	2	8	10

Source: Freedom House (2007) 'Map of Freedom in the World', see <http://www.freedomhouse.org/template.cfm?page=363&year=2007>

Box 1: Democracy assistance and the broader 'Good Governance' agenda

While democracy promotion has constituted a significant part of development assistance for two decades, it is only one part of a much broader international agenda to support 'good governance'. Donor programmes under the heading of 'good governance' go far beyond the normal scope of democracy assistance, extending to all aspects of how states are governed – that is, the rules by which governments are chosen and state power and authority are exercised.

Clearly, the democracy and good governance agendas overlap. For example, accountability and checks and balances are important to both. However, other aspects of the governance agenda, such as state capacity and effective service delivery, have no necessary relation to democracy. Indeed, the relationship between democratisation and improving other aspects of governance can be complex, with these two agendas pulling in opposite directions. Democratisation often entails diffusing power more evenly across a greater number of actors both within and outside government, while strengthening state capacity and improving performance may call for greater centralisation of power and autonomy in the decision-making process.

geo-political, humanitarian, diplomatic and developmental goals. Donors have supported democratisation efforts in the belief that democracy, as a system of governance, provides more benefits than authoritarianism, both internally and at the international level. The aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and growing concern with what the international community defines as 'fragile states' have given new resonance and urgency to the democracy assistance debate. At the rhetorical level at least, the goals of security, state-building and the promotion of democracy are now closely linked – even if pursuing all these objectives has proven considerably more challenging in actual practice.

On this basis, democracy assistance projects and related efforts have mushroomed since the 1990s. Activities range from electoral assistance and support for civil society and free media to the promotion of judiciary reforms and the rule of law. While it is difficult to find figures on aggregate amounts, it is estimated that by 2003-2004 total annual expenditures on democracy promotion by official donors totalled around \$2 billion. More than \$800 million was provided by USAID alone; while Germany and the UK were the largest funders in Europe. Democracy promotion financed by donor agencies now accounts for between 5% and 10% of total official development assistance.

Democracy assistance: Lessons learned and challenges ahead

This study examined five areas of democracy promotion that are particularly important for donors: i) elections and electoral processes; ii) political parties; iii) judicial reform; iv) civil society; and v) the media. As mentioned, many attempts at democratisation during the Third Wave have resulted in hybrid regimes and/or in uncertain democratic systems characterised by weak states. As a result, the central challenge for international democratisation

assistance is to support the stabilisation and deepening of democratic regimes and promote greater effectiveness of the state in ways that are compatible with a democratic regime.

Whether the international community is equipped to embrace this new challenge successfully remains an open question. Nevertheless, nearly three decades of democracy assistance experience have yielded many important lessons, offering significant opportunities to improve current practice.

The impetus for democratisation must come from within. To be successful democratisation processes need to be driven from within countries and supported by key domestic actors. As shown in Iraq, efforts to impose democracy from the outside without the necessary domestic support are unlikely to be sustainable, and may well backfire. While external factors can play a significant role in democratisation processes, acting as triggers (as happened at the end of the Cold War, for example) and influencing strategic domestic actors, they cannot act as substitutes for domestic support when it is lacking. External governments and donors need to be both realistic and humble about what can be achieved from the outside.

Donors should not rely on an idealised blueprint of democracy. In general, a review of the literature suggests that democracy assistance has been characterised by a lack of sensitivity to context. In areas such as support for political parties and the judiciary, there is a widespread perception that much democracy assistance is based on an idealised and Western-based notion of democracy that not even the most advanced Northern democracies have achieved. Donors tend to promote standard reform templates rather than adjusting their programmes to the specific political, social and economic power relations in different countries. This has meant that, very often, donor activities lack flexibility and are unresponsive to the needs and concerns arising in a country.

Donors should do more to strengthen accountability. Despite considerable efforts to strengthen the institutions of accountability such as electoral channels, legislatures, the judicial system and local government – executive dominance remains strong in many developing countries. 'Strong man' politics remains a marker of the political systems of many, if not most, developing countries undergoing democratisation. The general tendency of aid to support incumbent regimes and rely on agreements with the executive may itself contribute to this entrenchment of power within the executive and undermine other efforts to strengthen domestic accountability.

Democracy assistance should, therefore, give more emphasis to the strengthening and formalisation of rules governing executive powers and duties, as well as those of other branches of government, including the legislature, judiciary and civil service. The aim should be to develop the independence and capacity of other government branches and

strengthen the horizontal accountability mechanisms among them. At both the national and local levels, democracy assistance should also seek to improve transparency by identifying innovative ways to build the autonomy and capacity of oversight institutions such as freedom of information agencies and ombudsmen. Donors should, for instance, adopt a more concerted and united approach than they have to date to encourage the passage of freedom of information laws in Africa, and they should work closely with domestic supporters of such reforms to give such laws real teeth.

Donors should work with actors outside the donor ‘comfort zone’. One way to counter executive dominance is for donors to cast their nets wide and engage with a variety of actors. The international community has already made considerable progress in this direction, as shown by its efforts to support civil society, strengthen the judiciary, and foster a free, independent, and responsible media. However, donors tend to restrict their interactions to a limited range of actors and have not fully engaged with others that may provide equally useful entry points for international democracy assistance. In general, the international community needs to do more to reach out to societal actors in rural areas, as well as to groups from which they have kept their distance, considering them too political or too militant, including trade unions, farmers’ unions, faith-based groups, and crucially, political parties (see Box 2).

It is vital to balance different donor goals and improve policy coherence. As highlighted in Box 1, democracy assistance is only one aspect of a much broader donor agenda to promote ‘good governance’ and development, and the relationship between democratisation and improving other aspects of governance may not be straightforward. One of the central challenges for donors is, therefore, to appreciate that ‘all good things’ do not necessarily go together. When donors make choices regarding which forms of democracy assistance to provide, they also should take into consideration other aspects of good governance that may or may not combine with democratisation efforts in a mutually reinforcing manner. 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. The case of the media in Rwanda, which played a significant role in heightening ethnic tensions and disseminating hatred, is a particularly harrowing example of what happens when the former develops without the latter.

It is also essential to acknowledge that democracy assistance takes place alongside the pursuit of other foreign policy objectives. Greater policy coherence is, therefore, highly desirable to ensure that efforts on one front are not undermined by activities in other areas.

Donors should come to terms with the contra-

Box 2: Supporting political parties – democracy assistance as politically savvy

Political parties have remained one of the weakest links in democratic development in many incipient democracies, particularly in Africa and Latin America. Research suggests that the weak capacity and durability that parties exhibit, linked to the personalisation of politics and the prevalence of patronage networks and clientelism, constitute a major obstacle to the institutionalisation of democracy. Yet, political parties have been neglected by the international community.

Donors are reluctant to engage in work that is perceived as directly political. However, efforts to strengthen party systems do not need to be partisan. Donors and implementing agencies can choose to be balanced in providing support, working with parties across the political spectrum and focusing on their institutionalisation (establishment of internal rules; regularisation of funding; developing a programmatic basis), an area of widespread if not universal concern.

dications between the long-term nature of democracy-building and the need for results. Building democracy is a prolonged and non-linear process that requires long-term commitment. 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 that are too short-term, focusing on the tangible and high visibility elements such as elections, for example, rather than the long-term strengthening of other key institutions. They are also given to frequent changes in policy direction. Donors need to take more seriously the potential tensions that arise among the kinds of assistance that they provide as a result of these very different time horizons.

The sustainability of many interventions needs to be addressed. Donor assistance has changed the organisational landscape of many countries, but it is less clear whether democracy assistance has stimulated the emergence or further development of a vibrant home-grown civil society. Donors have much work to do in strengthening domestic civil society organisations so that they can become sustainable and self-sufficient over time. Donors should also be more sensitive to the implications of their extensive reliance on international non-governmental organisations (INGOs). While INGOs are often better placed than domestic NGOs to acquire a voice and influence policy processes, this may disadvantage home-grown civic organisations, weakening their capacity and sustainability.

There is a need for greater harmonisation and alignment in democratisation assistance. Donors should prioritise harmonisation and alignment if democracy assistance is to become more effective. This remains a challenge, within donors’ individual programmes as well as collectively. Donor fragmentation and lack of alignment of programmes to country priorities tend to undermine already weak institutions, especially in hybrid regimes. This has important implications for overall governance and state capacity, and ultimately for the effectiveness with which aid can be used in-country.

More meso- and macro-level evaluations of democratisation assistance are needed. While the menu of democracy assistance has increased over time, knowledge about its long-term effects remains limited. Efforts to share knowledge of best practices and lessons are limited and partial. While donor agencies have begun to evaluate their democracy promotion, evaluations tend to focus on particular projects in particular countries. More systematic

evaluations that are either thematic (e.g. assistance to media) or that review a range of interventions and their impact on a country's democratisation dynamic are extremely rare. The academic community has failed, with a few notable exceptions, to fill this gap and democracy assistance is poorly represented among scholarly titles. It is now vital to develop evaluation methods that can assess the depth and consolidation of democratisation.



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Project information

Irish Aid has commissioned ODI, CMI and additional partners to analyse other donor initiatives that are connected to the democracy assistance agenda, including decentralisation and efforts to combat corruption. While these are beyond the scope of this Project Briefing, an overview of the project can be found at www.odi.org.uk/pppg/politics_and_governance/what_we_do/Politics_aid/Governance_Aid_Poverty.html,

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