

## 6. PROMOTING LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

In the last 20 years, and especially in the last decade, a far-reaching global public policy network has rapidly developed to promote local democracy world-wide. Between 1974 and 1999, more than 40 countries experienced transitions from some form of authoritarian rule to more democratic systems. The democracy-promotion policy network responded to, and helped shape, this unprecedented wave of change.

One of the principal lessons learned from the democracy-promotion field is that local actors need to be more fully and systematically included in the global public policy network if external assistance for democracy-promotion is to be more successful. A close, co-operative and equal relationship among local and international actors in this network is critical. This chapter offers an overview of local democracy-promotion efforts, focusing on the network, methods, and lessons learned.

### 6.1 Overview of the Democracy-Promotion Network

■ *A critical challenge for democracy promoters is the need to co-ordinate across a vast number of organizations working in this arena.*

The network of actors mobilized in support of democracy-promotion includes the governments of major states and their aid agencies, international organizations, international financial institutions, multilateral donors, non-governmental organizations with global programmes, region and country-specific NGOs, and philanthropic organizations.

As a global public policy network, democracy-promotion organizations in the international arena are perhaps the most interventionist in terms of the elements of internal sovereignty with which they involve themselves. The construction of a domes-

tic political order, the internal legitimacy of a regime, the means of choosing leaders, and the relative balance of power among domestic social forces are perhaps the most sacred of all aspects of sovereignty. Yet pressures for democratization have also arisen from within, as mobilized groups pressure incumbent regimes for political liberalization. Coalitions have formed among international, regional, and domestic NGOs to co-operate on common goals. Often, this relationship has involved external funding by public (i.e., donor state) and private-sector (philanthropic foundations) sources for democracy advocacy groups within countries and for general support of an “open society”.

The democracy-promotion network features both horizontal and vertical dimensions. The *horizontal* dimension refers to collaboration and learning among various organizations at the same level – co-operation, for example, between the OSCE and the EU in a given case such as Bosnia. The *vertical* dimension is also apparent, as a global level organization such as the UN’s Electoral Assistance Division (UNEAD) assists a local independent election commission to organize itself and run an election. The process of governance includes linkages among actors at the same level and co-operation on multiple levels of the policy domain. These organizations often co-operate on the basis of comparative advantages that pool diverse resources (such as knowledge and funding) and address issues that no single organization can address on its own (like launching a major election monitoring mission). And they lend each other legitimacy by mutually reinforcing the purposes and effectiveness of their actions.

### 6.1.1 Purposes

With the end of the Cold War, ideological challenges to multi-party democracy withered away. The significant transitions to democracy in the former Soviet bloc (especially in Eastern Europe but also in Russia itself), in Africa, and in South-east Asia dramatically changed the context and created global political space for the emergence of a new set of actors engaged in the promotion of democratic governance. Today, fully 117 states can be considered democracies (countries with regular elections and good human rights records) according to the New York-based organization Freedom House, with a combined population of 2.35 billion people.

At the same time, differences between the trappings of *formal democracy* and the realities of continued non-democratic practices indicate that there were serious differences between transition (the movement among regime types) and the *deepening and quality of democracy* in terms of meaningful choice and public participation. Moreover, in many countries there were serious difficulties within the transitional period itself – such as a lack of trust among domestic actors on the relative free and

fair nature of elections – which prompted the rapid rise of an external election monitoring “industry”, for example. The global public policy network has its origins in both “supply” and “demand” dimensions of pressures for democracy. The supply of assistance emanates from the international community’s pursuit of democratization as a long-term path to global development and stability. The demand for outside help emanates from civil society groups within countries undergoing turbulent transitions to multi-party rule. External help can provide them with resources and reduce their vulnerability in their opposition to incumbent regimes.

### 6.1.2 Tasks

The variety of tasks performed by the network can be summed up with a typology that includes advocacy, funding or the provision of external resources, education and training, consulting and information sharing, and monitoring.

#### Advocacy

- *Promotion of new global norms.* The network has at times been involved with the creation of new norms in the international arena, particularly for example within regional organizations such as the OAS, OSCE, and OAU, as well as “soft law” norms such as the authoritative statement of the former UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali in his 1996 *Agenda for Democratization*. Funding has been provided directly to NGOs globally for creating and sustaining the network, and also directly to civil society actors in domestic contexts, to include capacity-building, training, the media, labour unions, and in some instances political parties.
- *Assisting specific cases.* The network has also engaged in efforts to promote democratization in specific instances. Probably the best example of a concerted effort by the network to advocate democracy in a specific instance is the case of Burma; an interesting aspect of this particular case is the widespread use of the Internet to create and maintain the network. There are myriad instances of the networks promoting or supporting specific advocates for democracy within countries, such as Nobel laureate Aung San Suu Kyi.

#### Funding

- *Providing financial support for NGOs.* One of the most important tasks of the network has been providing financial resources for local-level actors such as democracy-promotion NGOs in transitional countries. The actors providing this function include donor states, multilateral aid agencies, international organizations, and philanthropic foundations. Issues in the direct, external funding of opposition-related NGOs are equity, intrusion into internal affairs, sustainability over

time, transparency, and the legitimacy of local actors when they receive external financial support.

### **Education and Training**

- *Capacity-building.* Elements of the network, such as the party-affiliated organizations in the United States, the National Democratic Institute for International Affairs (NDI) and the International Republican Institute for International Affairs (IRI), have been at times involved in directly training political party officials and candidates in transitional countries. Similarly, training has been provided for functions such as electoral administration and election-related dispute resolution.
- *Civic education.* International NGOs have been extensively involved in mounting civic education campaigns in transitional societies, from “get out the vote” campaigns to “street law” (practical applications of human rights), to awareness of constitutional concepts and the meaning and purpose of democracy.
- *Training for government reform or improved practices.* The network has promoted democracy through training programmes aimed at improved transparency and accountability, and through more effective aspects of governance such as parliamentary rules and guidelines. The international NGO Parliamentarians for Global Action, for example, has provided opportunities for training newly-elected legislators in law-drafting procedures.

#### Consulting and Information Sharing

- *Best practices, comparative information, and specific consulting.* Due to the highly technical nature of aspects of democracy such as constitutional design and electoral system choice and administration, a key function of the democracy-building network has been to provide information and specific consultative advice on these often complex issues. In 1995, for example, the UN’s Electoral Assistance Division helped sponsor the work of the Fiji Constitutional Review Commission, which toured the globe meeting with scholars, NGOs, and state officials on best practices for constitutional design in multi-ethnic societies.

### **Election Administration and Monitoring**

- *Election monitoring.* The most celebrated function of the network has been its extensive work in monitoring transitional elections. Monitoring involves everything from placing international poll watchers at voting booths, to assessing media coverage, to evaluating vote tabulation and results, tracking public opinion, and the often controversial practice of parallel vote tabulation independent of the authorities. Election monitoring has been a particularly regular instrument in post-war situations, a practice which was first widespread in Namibia in 1989

and which has been a remarkable feature of virtually every post-war election since then.

- *Election administration.* At times, although rarely, the international network has been called in to administer an election within the boundaries of a sovereign state. The most recent example is the UN-administered referendum in East Timor; important antecedents include the OSCE-managed elections in Bosnia and UNTAC's administration of the 1993 elections in Cambodia.

The initial results of the democracy-promotion network's performance of these tasks are highly difficult to measure. Success in the creation and consolidation of democracy can be defined in many different ways; different actors may use different criteria in evaluating whether a democracy has advanced; and assessment of education and training programmes involves long-term tracking of individuals and their attitudes and behaviour. Success might be viewed as an election that is relatively free and fair and without violence, or it might be the fact that a training programme was run, but the actual impact on the political dynamic is hard to know. In sum, there are good short-term measures of successful programmes and efforts, but evaluating whether democracy is truly taking root in a society in the long-term entails a much more difficult means of evaluating progress.

At least one of the lessons learned is that national-level elections are well and good, but one or even two elections do not make a democracy. The democracy-promotion network has been seen as myopic in its pursuit of elections in circumstances where the believed conditions for electoral democracy arguably do not exist. The emphasis on poorly conceived or administered national election processes in cultivating democracy has often been cited by critics of democratization as *the* fallacy of democracy-promotion. Of course a national election to establish the legitimacy of a democratic government is critical and necessary. But democracy involves more than elections, it requires a bottom-up dynamic that has often been lacking in transitional states.

Top-down approaches to democracy are insufficient and indeed inefficient for promoting democracy; bottom-up approaches are not just complementary, but in the long-term are more important for successful democracy-promotion. Many cite Bosnia as an example in which the international community has devoted significant resources to hold two major post-war elections, with the elections' outcomes described as nothing more than an "ethnic census". At the same time, local democracy-promotion efforts have seen at least some success in encouraging multi-ethnic accommodation in a very difficult post-war situation such as Bosnia.

## 6.2 New Emphases on Local Democracy

■ *Democracy-promotion organizations are placing a new emphasis on supporting local democracy in order to provide long-term support for young democracies.*

Increasingly, the international democracy-promotion network is therefore turning its attention to decentralization and the democratization of local governance as a complement to its ongoing work at national-level democracy-promotion. International organizations, bilateral aid agencies, the international financial institutions, and democracy-building NGOs are placing greater emphasis on promoting democratic local governance. The new emphasis is a direct result of the inadequacy of focusing too much on national-level governance and an appreciation of the potential role local democracy can play in ameliorating the adverse effects of globalization. In emphasizing local governance, these organizations are also building global public policy networks that significantly rely on bolstering the activities of local organizations working closest to the immediate interests and needs of people.

An interesting aspect of the emerging local democracy network is the growing linkages and collaboration among local government officials and administrators internationally. Municipal associations in emerging democracies have been pivotal players in advocating for local self-government and international linkages have been important to them in arguing their case for greater devolution of powers. At the international level, IULA, established in 1913 and with a secretariat in The Hague, is an influential co-ordinating body. Its mission is to represent the interests of local government in international organizations such as the UN, promote global norms on democracy at the local level, advance the participation of women, and to exchange information and lessons learned for education and training purposes.

The network for the promotion of local self-governance is a sub-network of the larger effort to promote democracy world-wide. International organizations, in particular the UNDP Management and Governance Programme, have made significant efforts throughout the world in promoting decentralization and local democracy as a key to good governance, economic development, and improved quality of life through the rubric of “sustainable human development”. In particular, the UNDP’s Local Initiative Facility for Urban Environment (LIFE) programme has emphasized participatory policy-making in development; its “MagNet” on-line resource base ([www.magnet.undp.org](http://www.magnet.undp.org)) offers information dissemination on democratic local practices through the Internet. Similarly, the UN-sponsored Commission on Human Settlements (CHS) has played a critical role in setting the agenda on the priorities of local governance.

The efforts of regional organizations in promoting local governance are also significant. Both the OSCE's Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) and the OAS's Unit for the Promotion of Democracy have significant local democracy-promotion programmes. Bilateral aid agencies have also played a critical role; for example, the Norwegian Foreign Ministry has provided financial support of more than US\$ 35 million in support of local governance and municipal reform in South Africa. USAID has worked extensively on promoting local governance in the newly-independent states of the former Soviet Union.

Democracy-promotion NGOs with global reach, such as the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES), US-based political party organizations such as NDI and IRI, the German party-based *Stiftungen*, have devoted considerable resources and support for local political party development, the training of local electoral management bodies, and programmes in public administration that emphasize democratic decision-making programmes. Universities, too, have been involved with such training; notably the Institute of Local Government Studies at the University of Birmingham (UK) works to evaluate and assess local governance in Russia and the Baltics. Another example of a university-based centre is the Mega-Cities Project of the City University of New York, which has programmes in virtually every one of the some 22 cities in the world with more than 10 million inhabitants. Similarly, university centres have also turned their attention to the importance of decentralization and improved local governance in growth, development, and conflict management in divided societies.

### 6.2.1 Methods

Outside actors use various methods to promote local democracy. UNDP has been engaged in establishing tripartite networks that involve public officials, local authorities and administrators, and private sector enterprises for participatory development projects at the local level. Conference diplomacy has also been a feature of this network in setting the agenda for the promotion of local self-governance to meet the challenges of urbanization and globalization, in particular the UN-sponsored Habitat I and II conferences on human settlements and Agenda 2000.

NGOs have been critical in the network, and again the post-war arena offers examples of the critical nature that these organizations have played in concert with international and regional organizations. Conflict-management specialists have been increasingly concerned with efforts to build local capacities for consensus-building skills that feature negotiation, mediation, and coalition-building capabilities for problem-solving. This is especially the case in post-conflict societies.

### 6.2.2 Lessons Learned

There are some lessons learned from these attempts at local democracy-promotion through innovative democratic practices:

- *Do not expect too much from collaborative problem-solving.* Collaborative problem-solving processes do not make conflicts go away. This is true of post-war societies, but participatory practices also have their limits in urban arenas in developed countries, in which cities are increasingly segregated by ethnic differences. In most cases, people will not give up their long-held interests of principle, religious beliefs, territory, property, rights of assembly and speech, or their material needs for housing, clean water, or sanitation, just to seek accommodative solutions. Consensus-oriented approaches are limited by the hard facts and entrenched positions of many situations of deep-rooted conflict. But, when people can work to turn their attention toward the problem instead of turning toward their adversaries, practical consensus solutions can be found in even very acrimonious, post-war relationships.
- *Multi-layered approaches to democracy-promotion should emphasize the importance of bottom-up approaches and fully integrate local NGOs and officials into the global public policy network.* The multi-layered approach has several distinct advantages: it allows actors in the network to develop comparative advantages; a layered approach allows for the development of more sustainable local NGOs; and the co-operative interaction between global-level and local actors can be mutually reinforcing, with each lending legitimacy to the work of the other. That is, global level democracy-promotion NGOs find intrusive work more legitimate when they can show that there is a local demand for democratic reform. Similarly, local actors can point to the world-wide movement for greater democracy to legitimate their mission and activities.
- *Much has already been learned, and these findings need to be integrated into practice.* Within the short time frame in which democracy-promotion has been a major feature of the international system, there has been considerable learning about how to go about enhancing elections and direct participation. For example, election systems need to be carefully considered; multi-party competition can be very divisive, and indeed incendiary in societies that are deeply divided along identity lines.
- *Co-ordination is critical in the network.* When no single organization is able to mount a major mission such as an electoral observation activity, or when grass-roots involvement requires a keen appreciation of the local scene, co-ordination among actors in the network is essential. International organizations have proven to be very well placed to serve this co-ordination function. They have implicit “convening power” (the ability to get all relevant parties around the table) and they are normally perceived as neutral and unbiased.

- *Sustainability of local-level actors in the network is a serious concern, and more attention needs to be paid to ways in which local NGOs can become more self-sustaining.* In some instances, such as in Mozambique, a major election assistance mission has helped in the inaugural election in 1994. More than US\$ 80 million in assistance was provided, much of it with the aim of bolstering local capacity for ongoing promotion of democracy in that fragile, war-torn country. In local elections in 1998, however, the international community's financial assistance was much more limited, and an absence of sufficient engagement from abroad is at least one reason why the municipal elections were not very successful (see section 4.3). In 1999 national elections, donors sharply reduced the assistance provided and there are now serious questions about the sustainability of a significant democracy-promotion NGO sector in Mozambique. Democracy-promotion is a long-haul project, and donor commitment to sustaining local actors in the network is an important challenge for the years ahead.

### 6.2.3 Outlook

A critical step in the further evolution of this network is the furtherance of international norms on local democracy. It is useful to note that even in countries where competition in national-level democracy is constrained, for example in China and Iran, there have been recent instances of vigorous local-level democracy. That is, there are few ideological barriers to the recognition of the importance of local self-governance and the basic tenets of local democracy. Moreover, there are strong developmental reasons for enhancing local democracy that are widely recognized in the international community. The approval by the UN General Assembly of the draft World Charter on Local Self-Government would give a significant boost to the further development of the network. The new norm would establish a clear right to democracy and stimulate institutional change in countries around the world.

Other avenues for fruitful development of this network include the further sharing of information and experience on options for enhanced participation at the local level and a better recognition of the inherent dilemmas of participatory practices. If collaborative policy-making is to be a hallmark of the future of democracy-promotion and high on the agenda of members of the network, more needs to be understood on the conditions in which participatory democracy at the local level is possible, desirable, and appropriate. The importance of skills transfers and learning across experience – for example on difficult issues of governance of cities with significant migrant communities – is a critical challenge for this network in the years to come.

Democracy-promotion will require more emphasis on local governance as the forces of change for billions of urban dwellers are increasingly affected by influences beyond the parameters of a single country or region. In the twenty-first century, rates

PROMOTING LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

of urbanization will continue to be very high in the developing world, with the advent of dozens of new mega-cities in Asia and Africa a virtual demographic certainty. Effective governance of new and old cities alike in an urbanizing world is critical to the project of promoting human rights, international security, and sustainable development. Innovation in urban democracy is a global challenge. It will require further development of the nascent global public policy network for local democracy-promotion, featuring above all the more systematic inclusion of local-level NGOs and local elected officials in the multi-layered system of governance that inevitably will be required.

**Further Reading**

- Bhatnagar, Bhuvan and Aubrey C. Williams. 1992. *Participatory Development and the World Bank*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Boutros-Ghali, Boutros. 1996. *An Agenda for Democratization*. New York: United Nations.
- Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Violence. 1997. *Preventing Deadly Violence: Final Report*. Washington, DC: The Carnegie Commission.
- Carothers, Thomas. 1999. *Aiding Democracy Abroad: The Learning Curve*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.
- Demichelis, Julia. 1998. *NGOs and Peacebuilding in Bosnia's Ethnically Divided Cities. Special Report*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- Diamond, Larry. 1996. *Promoting Democracy in the 1990s: Actors and Instruments, Issues and Imperatives*. Washington, DC: Carnegie Commission on Preventing Deadly Conflict.
- Freedom House. 1999. *Freedom in the World: The Annual Survey of Political Rights and Civil Liberties*. New York: Freedom House.
- International City/County Management Association. *Local Government in Transition Countries: A Perspective for the Year 2000*. Washington, DC: International City/County Management Association.
- Kumar, Krishna, ed. 1997. *Rebuilding Societies After Civil War*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Kumar, Krishna, ed. 1998. *Postconflict Elections, Democratization, and International Assistance*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Kumar, Krishna and Marina Ottaway. 1997. *From Bullets to Ballots: Electoral Assistance to Post-conflict Societies*. Washington, DC: US Agency for International Development, Center for Development Information and Evaluation.
- Lederach, John Paul. 1997. *Building Peace: Sustainable Reconciliation in Divided Societies*. Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace.
- McCoy, Jennifer, Larry Garber and Robert A. Pastor. 1991. "Making Peace by Observing and Mediating Elections". *Journal of Democracy*, 2 (4). Pp. 102-114.
- Quigley, Kevin F. 1997. *For Democracy's Sake: Foundations and Democracy Assistance in Central Europe*. Washington, DC: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press.
- Rietbergen-McCracken, Jennifer. 1996. *Participation in Practice: The Experience of the World Bank and Other Stakeholders*. (World Bank Discussion Paper No. 333). Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- World Bank. 1994. *Governance: The World Bank's Experience*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- World Bank. 1992. *Governance and Development*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.