



Democracy Roundtable 2008 Theme: Democracy and Development

Concept note

1. Background and rationale

The Democracy Roundtable 2008 to be held in conjunction with the annual meeting of the IDEA Council of Member States, will take place in Delhi, India, on 17-18 June 2008. Its theme will be “**Democracy and Development**”. The co-organisers are the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) and the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS), in cooperation with the Indian Council of World Affairs (ICWA) and with the support of the Indian Ministry of External Relations.

There is an evolving broad understanding that the linkages between democracy and development are multiple and equally relevant for national political actors on the one hand, and for the development and democracy support communities on the other. The implications of these linkages appear to be at the core of some of the key challenges the various actors face today, such as:

- the decreasing trust in vital institutions of representative democracy in many parts of the world (political parties and parliaments in particular)
- the perception that domestic democratic processes are becoming less relevant in the light of powerful external influences generated by globalization, hardly controllable financial flows, trade protectionism, mass migrations, etc.
- the raise of populist politics and, in some cases, “hybrid” regimes that obviously feed on the low “delivery” capacity of many democracies
- the deepening North/South polarization - exploited by forces opposed to democracy and interested in promoting the idea that democracy is a Northern and Western construct

The democracy and development landscapes are both changing rapidly and in many ways. Regional differences are important as problems, opportunities and assets greatly vary, for example between Asia, Africa and Latin America.

On the development side, the driving forces of change seem to be shifting from Europe and the US towards Asia; Latin America remains sensitive to external trade and financial flows, while most African countries are still dependent on ODA.

On the democracy side, an important number of African countries are yet to build their first democratic institutions; in Latin America which is about to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the so called “third” wave of democratic transitions, some

countries, particularly in the Andean region, are experiencing serious challenges in terms of both institutional stability and delivery. Finally, Asia presents a multi-faceted picture hosting at the same time the largest democracy of the world and populous countries where democracy is yet to be achieved or consolidated.

Changes are also noticeable on the democracy support side as new actors are coming to the stage, such as private foundations and the corporate sector. All these transformations are influencing the relationship between democracy and development. All of them have a distinctly political nature, though the ongoing debate about the democracy-development nexus is both academic and political.

2. Democracy-development linkages

On the academic side, literature about the democracy-development linkages is both abundant and inconclusive. This is really not surprising if we consider that both development and democracy are understood in so many different ways. In a nutshell, some scholars have claimed that there was a causal link. Others refuted its existence arguing that evidence was contradictory and that there were plenty of examples to substantiate different, if not opposed views. Finally, some scholars recognize that the link exists but is not direct and causal but somewhat more complex.

Both terms have undergone a semantic evolution over the last couple of decades: Development used to be understood as the synonym of economic growth. Today, it still includes growth, but is also broadly understood as a process leading to a continuous improvement of the quality of life of the majority of the people, particularly the poor. It also incorporates the dimension of human rights – including civic and political rights and should ideally lead to the reduction of disparities in the distribution of income. The way we use the term democracy has also undergone important changes: from liberal democracy – concerned essentially with individual freedoms, electoral mechanisms and the non-interference of the state in the economy – towards participatory democracy and, some would say, also towards social democracy, not in the sense of the programme implemented by a specific political party, but as a system of governance expected to deliver on social and economic rights and development in the broadest sense.

In spite of the ambiguous findings on the impact of democracy on growth and vice versa, there is a growing consensus – almost a universal acceptance – of three points:

- First, that both development and democracy are desirable – are values to be pursued in themselves;
- Second, that development is more than economic growth;
- Third, that democracy is more than the institutions and the mechanics of democracy i.e. that democracy is also expected to deliver in terms of a better quality of life.

Thus, we may say that there has been a converging evolution of the two terms towards each other: democracy is more and more meant to include development and development is more and more meant to include the realization of basic human rights, including, of course, civic and political rights.

On the political side too, while both democracy and development are seen as values “per se” – pursued for their own sake – it is becoming increasingly evident that

democratic institutions and processes, in order to be sustainable, need to deliver: to generate development, better public services and improved “quality of life”. In other terms, democracy, besides being “the freedom of choice” is also expected to provide “freedom from want”, i.e. development.

On the other hand, national development priorities, in order to genuinely reflect citizens’ needs and expectations, should be shaped and implemented through effective democratic processes that engage a broad spectrum of political actors – political parties and legislators in the first place.

The importance of these linkages has been grasped by the international community, including most bilateral development cooperation agencies, the OECD’s Development Assistance Committee, development organizations such as the World Bank, etc.

This is reflected in the fact that good governance has been included in the Millennium Development Goals and also in the fact that democratic governance is often included as an important criterion for aid allocation.

3. Inclusive national ownership through political processes

The impact of globalisation on the one hand and the dynamics of some international cooperation mechanisms on the other, seem to have rendered the concept of “national ownership” in development more difficult to define and more challenging to implement.

National development processes have become a function of multiple domestic and external influences, the latter ranging from changing terms of trade to volatile financial markets, to shifting investment opportunities and to uneven security situations.

Development cooperation mechanisms currently based on the “poverty reduction strategy processes” (PRSPs) have gone a long way to address the issue of national ownership of development priorities of partner countries. The “recipes” of the nineties (embodied in the “structural adjustment policies”) are no longer considered valid and have evolved from advocating “a minimum of government” towards advocating “accountability and responsiveness” of government – in other terms “good governance”. The emphasis today is on sound public policies, accountability, poverty-reduction, and above all, national ownership of development policies.

However, national ownership is still too often interpreted as ownership by the executive branch of the government. PRSPs and other instruments are essentially negotiated and agreed between executive branches of governments, as they do represent the respective countries in negotiating international and bilateral agreements. This basic fact should not, however, lead to a reduced scope for a real internal democratic debate on national development agendas. An excessive emphasis on the executive branch may undermine the functions of other actors in political systems, parliaments and political parties in the first place.

In polarized political environments, not least in post conflict situations, applying the principle of ownership essentially through ministries and high executive officers of finance or planning may risk exacerbating the polarization. If in the eyes of the political opposition, the international community is seen as caring for the government party only, it will be hard to avoid a “winner takes all” political culture in which being in government means access to big resources while being in opposition means trying to

block whatever effort the government makes, and trying to reap the benefits of office at the next elections. The space for nationally owned, broad-based visions for development may thus be hard to achieve, and the international community may, inadvertently and paradoxically, be part of the reason why. The problem has been identified on both sides of the North/South divide and there are debates on how to overcome it.

For democracy to grow and be consolidated in developing countries, national political society – political parties and legislators – need to assume a key role in the shaping and approval of national developmental agendas. They need to translate citizens' expectations into coherent developmental programmes.

The ongoing debate in international fora testifies to the surfacing of new approaches that take into account not only the close inter-linkages between democracy and development support, but also the eminently political nature of both processes.

4. Structure and key issues on the agenda

The 2008 Roundtable on Democracy and Development will bring together a group of key scholars from different parts of the world, authors and policy practitioners, to debate on the challenges ahead, to inspire the thinking and, possibly, the development of related policies of member states, and to contribute forging a more supportive mutual relationship between development and democracy support at global level.

The Roundtable will seek to address three dimensions of the challenge, i.e.:

- The role of the “political society” – parties, parliaments and other actors in developing countries in developing policy proposals geared towards sustainable development and effective poverty reduction – while holding their executives accountable for the implementation of such policies and while being themselves accountable to their citizens.
- The role of the international community in contributing to the opening of broader spaces for “political society” in developing countries in the shaping of national development priorities and poverty reduction strategies
- The impact of globalization on democracy - as an opportunity for building more open democratic societies whose citizens are aware of global challenges, but also, as an external force difficult to control through established national institutions of democracy.

These three facets of the nexus are proposed as themes for the two Roundtable panels:

- o Panel A: Development: An ideal? An electoral slogan? A *sine qua non* of democracy?
- o Panel B: “Room for politics!” Democratizing national ownership in development.
- o Panel C: “Democracy: The Impact of Globalization”