

Transcript Massimo Tommasoli- International IDEA:

Hello. My name is Massimo Tommasoli, and I've been working at International IDEA, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, for about 21 years, since 2004 until January of 2025. I've worked in IDEA in different capacities, initially as Director of Operations and as a Permanent Observer for International IDEA to the UN, based in New York, and, for the last 3 years, as Director of Global Programs. Today I will talk to you about the origins of the institution for which I've been working for such a long time.

International IDEA is the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance. It is based in Stockholm, the headquarters are on a nice little island in the middle of the city, just between the Parliament and the City Hall (Stadshuset). For those who haven't been there, it's worth a visit. A fantastic place to visit.

It had been established in 1995, but the establishment of IDEA was the completion of a process that took more than three years, and, in fact, the founder of International IDEA, Ambassador Bengt Säre-Söderbergh noted, in a couple of memoirs, that he had ideas about establishing an institute focusing on democracy and electoral assistance already in 1989. In fact, that was, as we all know, the date or the period when the end of the Cold War was epitomized by the fall of the Berlin Wall. But even earlier, Bengt Säre-Söderbergh had been very active and engaged in supporting the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa. Therefore, he had been confronted with issues about civil and political rights, especially in an authoritarian regime context, I would say, for most part of his previous career.

When the Berlin Wall fell down, many institutions were already active in the support to democratic elections and, more broadly, in democracy assistance. But the framework was very different at the time. The 1970s had been a decade of transition, especially in Latin America. Many transitions started in that decade and it has been defined also the Third Wave of Democratization by political scientists¹. The structure of the Cold War world didn't allow for much space for maneuvering in authoritarian regimes. So the work of those supporting democracy activists in authoritarian regimes was very limited, but with the end of the Cold War a major shift in geopolitics allowed for greater involvement of external actors in supporting domestic democracy builders in many regions of the world.

Among others, institutions that were particularly active in that space were political party foundations that worked on the basis of party-to-party support linked to the fact they belong to the same political party family, but there were also institutions active in supporting electoral observation. The United Nations, of course, as well as regional organizations that had global normative frameworks that, although did not really focus on democracy as a global norm,

¹ Samuel Huntington, *The Third Wave: Democratization in the Late Twentieth Century*. Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991.

addressed the individual aspects of what we consider the building blocks of democracy. For example, the United Nations, already in 1992, started to work institutionally in a much more structured way than in the previous decades on electoral assistance. Of course, the UN already had engaged in electoral assistance in the past, especially during the decolonization process, but the end of the Cold War provided for a great number of demands that came from countries undergoing democratization that requested assistance for holding free and fair elections, as they used to be called at the time. Also, the decade of the 1980s, had seen, in the UN context, an interest in a movement that was defined as the 'new' or 'restored democracies' movement, with a series of conferences that started in Manila in the Philippines in 1988² and then, under the aegis of the United Nations, went ahead for about 25 years since then.

However, the United Nations had some important constraints and limitations in their democracy support, and some of them were political. In essence, the United Nations is an organization whose membership is not based on whether the Member States are democratic or not. Even democracy, as a concept, does not feature in the UN Charter, explicitly quoted at least. Although the principles of democracy permeate most of the founding documents of the United Nations and its action in the main areas of development, human rights and peace and security. Therefore, there were some political limitations that were linked to the notion of national sovereignty. In fact, the movement of new or restored democracies carved out a role for the UN in supporting domestic efforts at democratization and, to prevent criticisms from some of the membership of the UN about the possible external influence in domestic matters.

A second aspect that represented a constraint in UN action in this field was probably more bureaucratic. The capacities of the UN were potentially enormous, but the UN was not wired at the time for providing the kind of quick and down-to-earth, very practical assistance that was needed in order to cope with the challenges of organizing elections in a transition phase.

So the assessment of these constraints by Bengt S  ve-S  derbergh, and a number of like-minded high-level officials from different organizations with whom he had been in touch, was the basis that motivated the launch by the Swedish Government of what was called a feasibility study. The Swedish Government decided to entrust Bengt S  ve-S  derbergh with the implementation of a feasibility study on the establishment of an independent electoral institution for electoral assistance, and that happened in 1992. This feasibility study took about a year and a half. It was completed by October 1993, and it was implemented by a commission composed of those high-level personalities that I referred to. Many of them, personalities who had been involved in providing support, or had experience also in their own countries' transitions.

This feasibility study was based on a highly consultative approach. Those institutions that have been active in the space of electoral assistance were consulted, as well as institutions in the

² The first conference was held in Manila in June 1988. In addition to the Philippines, the initial group included Argentina, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Greece, Honduras, Nicaragua, Peru, Portugal, El Salvador, Spain and Uruguay. The second "International conference on new or restored democracies" (ICNRD), held in Managua in July 1994, called for UN support and a resolution on the ICNRD movement was subsequently adopted by the UN General Assembly.

multilateral landscape that addressed the individual aspects of what we call and know today as democracy assistance. A roundtable was held in Geneva in February 1993. under the aegis of this feasibility study, promoted by the Swedish Government. The roundtable provided some recommendations about the establishment of an institute.

First of all, it identified the demands. These demands were unmet in light of what I said before about the United Nations, because, although the UN had been quite active in providing support to certain electoral processes, nevertheless, it didn't play the role of an international clearing house about **knowledge** on electoral assistance. That was a need highly felt by practitioners and policymakers in that field.

The second area where there was a demand was **research**. While the initial focus of this need was on electoral observation, it was very clear since the start to the members of the Commission that carried out the feasibility study, that it was not possible to make sense of knowledge about electoral assistance without taking into account broader issues related to democratization in a larger perspective. Other areas that required inputs by a prospective institution with the focus on electoral assistance and democracy were the development of **training tools** for practitioners and officers working in this space and the provision of **advisory and capacity building services** to those who made requests in this respect. Essentially these four fields or areas of work initially identified, became the basis for the definition of the mission of the new institute.

And what was the vision for the institute then? Well, I think that it is very telling of the composition of the first Council of Member States that eventually established the Institute in 1995. It was made of 14 Member States some of them from the global North, or West, and some of them from the global South. They included Member States from Latin America, from Europe, from Asia and from Africa.

I think that, in terms of the vision, this projected the idea, that Bengt S  ve-S  derbergh stated also in internal memos, about the need for a strong South-to-South experience-sharing in democracy building.

In one of the memos that he wrote for convening the meetings and the consultations that prepared, paved the way for the establishment of the institute, he made reference to the experience of South Africa. In particular, he was very impressed by what had happened in South Africa in 1994, the transition to democracy of which, as I told you before, he had direct experience, as he had been very engaged in supporting the anti-apartheid movement. He noted in a sentence that I may quote almost verbally, something like: "What could an institute like this, a new institute like this, do in order to share the experiences of the South Africas and the Namibias of the world for the other countries that could undergo the same process."

In terms of vision, there was a very strong characterization of democracy as something that did not belong just to one region of the world, or did not simply represent one model of democracy. But it was more the vision of democracy as a very basic and fundamental, universal core of

principles and values that could be promoted by experience-sharing across the globe, within regions and across the regions of the world, by making use of a non-prescriptive approach. When I joined IDEA in 2004, I remember that this emphasis on being non-prescriptive was very strong. I think it was the heritage of the founding phase of International IDEA.

In terms of structure, the organization was established in February 1995,. although the actual operation started after summer of that year. They started really from scratch. It is fascinating to think about that period when you look at the situation that institutions working in the space of international development, cooperation, aid, humanitarian aid, human rights and democratic governance are experiencing now.

That was an entirely different world, where a visionary from a small country, perceived as neutral by the rest of the world, could envision the establishment of a new multilateral organization with global membership that could advance the agenda of promoting democracy based on principles as simple as, “while there is instant coffee, there is no instant democracy”, or the fact that “democracy cannot be exported but it should be supported.” One could think these like small things, but they actually mean a lot if you consider that 30 years after that visionary paved the way for the establishment of International IDEA, IDEA is working in all the continents, with offices in over 20 countries, offices also in New York and Brussels, trying to influence the agenda-setting in the UN or the European Union, and with a budget that, despite some hiccups over time, has expanded constantly.

Let me say a couple of things about the budget. I've looked into the documents on how this issue was addressed, and the estimates in the feasibility study were, for the first year, to the tune of \$1,475,000 for the establishment of the organization. And then for the second year, that is probably the size that they felt initially would have been the cruising altitude for the organization to fly, it would have been \$2,760,000. Well, when I joined IDEA, the budget was to the tune of 10 million dollars in 2004, and it has grown constantly over time, as I said, with hiccups as there have been good years and bad years.

What do these changes over time reflect? Well, a shift in the emphasis and the focus of the main donors with respect to democracy assistance. It is interesting to compare these shifts in focus, and also the changes in the flows of investment in democracy assistance, with the analysis of democratization or the rise of authoritarian regimes over time. If you look at the main reports that analyze the quality of democracy in the world and also region-by-region, including the report published by International IDEA, the Global State of Democracy Report—also if you take into account the V-dem report or Freedom House or the Economist Intelligence Unit Report and their indexes—it is interesting to see that the level of investment in democracy assistance, does not go hand-in-hand with the level of needs that you would identify looking in the democratization or authorization curves over time. In fact, this is considered as an area of investment that is vulnerable. The constituency for democracy building is not as strong as for other policy areas and despite the case for democracy in a developmental perspective, which has been a major issue addressed by researchers, including international IDEA, over time, the case for democracy as instrumental in bringing about more sustainable development over time

has been proved also by analysis and solid data, policymakers are still rather weak in their determination for the long term.

I would like to go back to the original vision that Bengt [Säve-Söderbergh] and the founding Member States had when they established International IDEA in 1995. One of the comments that you find in the documentation, in the documents produced by the Commission and through the feasibility study, is that a lot of work that was done in the early 1990s in democracy and electoral assistance was very short-term.

It was focused on the election event on election day. It didn't take into account what happened before or after elections. In fact, the notion of electoral cycle was introduced, thanks also to IDEA and a number of other like-minded organizations, as a result of that research that was called for by Bengt Säve-Söderbergh and the founding Member States. Now the notion of protecting the integrity of elections is not only about carrying out high-quality international election observation missions; it is also about looking at the integrity of elections throughout the electoral cycle. I think this is a major contribution that International IDEA, together with the many partners that worked even before it was established and then collaborated with IDEA after its creation, have given to this field.

International idea increased its membership from the original 14 Member States to the current 35 Member States, including from regions that were not represented in the original bunch of Member States.

It also changed its governance structure. Initially, there were among members of International IDEA, also international NGOs. Now there are only Member States. Despite this change in the governance, it has not turned into a small UN. International IDEA is not captured by the same kind of dynamics that you might find in some UN policy bodies, where the search for consensus turns into a de-facto veto power by those who are unlike-minded on certain issues. In fact, joining IDEA is based also on compliance with the very broad and basic, but still binding, definition of democracy. It is a multilateral intergovernmental organization, I would say, the only intergovernmental organization with an exclusive mandate on democracy. Again, this was a great idea that we owe to the founder, Bengt Säve-Söderbergh.

Its focus initially was on two pillars. During the years of Bengt Säve-Söderbergh as the first Secretary General of International IDEA, which were the last part of the decade of the 1990s, and the initial part of the 2000s, the two pillars were: first, capacity building, with work based essentially on the notion of assessing the quality of democracy at the country level in order to identify entry points for capacity building and activities.

The second pillar, which was about research and knowledge production. Those were the years when some of the flagship publications for which IDEA is well known, still nowadays, were produced. For example, the *Electoral System Design Handbook*, the *Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict Handbook*, or the *Women in Parliament Handbook*. All of these were based on that notion of non-prescriptive knowledge sharing, rooted in practical experience by

institutions and individuals who worked on the ground in different regions of the world, and analyzed in a global perspective in order to distill what works and what doesn't work, and make it available for an audience of practitioners and policymakers.

There was also an emphasis on databases, again, not in isolation, but actually in close partnership with UN institutions and other institutions working in this field. A curriculum for training of trainers in electoral administration was developed, especially with the support of the Australian Election Commission, and what became sort of an online knowledge encyclopedia—an online knowledge resource—known as ACE has been developed and still is maintained as we speak with an interactive function “Ask The Expert” that has been very useful for answering simple questions that practitioners in the field of democracy assistance, or electoral offices on the ground, might have in running elections.

New areas of work have been developed also. Following the end of the term of duty of Bengt Säre-Söderbergh, with new secretary generals, for example, an entire new area of work on constitution building and democracy, another one on climate change and democracy, digitalization and democracy. Also, work on political finance and regulatory frameworks for political party funding, parliamentary strengthening, and of course, the key work carried out on inclusion, gender, and the political participation and representation of women. The work on the assessment of the quality of democracy that was started initially, also through the capacity building program and through research on a comparative analysis of the quality of democracy, through a revision of the methodology developed by the democracy audits in both established democracies and new democracies are now at the basis of the Global State of Democracy Initiative that produces a yearly report on the global state of democracy. Also a democracy tracker that monitors events affecting the quality of democracy, by using the same conceptual framework adopted for the analysis of the Global State of Democracy.

So that is what IDEA is now, but I wanted to focus here on the fact that the original inputs—the vision that was articulated so well and also in a flexible way at the beginning of its history—is still playing a major role in order for International IDEA to be relevant, to be responsive, to work in collaboration with other actors in the democracy assistance field and developing relationships or partnerships with some of those countries that may actually now become active providers or democracy assistance, once they have actually undergone the transition to democracy. Thank you for listening, and have a good day.