Transcript

Good afternoon, my name is Larry Garber, and I'm going to be talking today about the role of democracy and governance programming at the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), but will also provide a slightly broader context.

First, a word about myself and how I got involved in this sector. In 1983, a long time ago, I was working as a lawyer and doing some pro bono work for my law firm with a group called the International Human Rights Law Group. I decided to leave the law firm, and the Law Group offered me a position as a legal director for a project that they had just received a grant to implement from the United States Agency for International Development. The grant was under the 116E Human Rights Fund, which was a small grants fund authorized by Congress to develop research in the human rights area. The project that I was recruited for was to write a handbook, which ultimately became *Guidelines for International Election Observing*. And so that began my journey into the world of U.S. government development programs, democracy programs, and election programs. The handbook was published in 1984, but that period was also very important more broadly from an institutional perspective, in terms of the evolution of democracy programs at USAID and within the U.S. government.

In 1983, the National Endowment for Democracy was established by an act of Congress as a follow-up to a speech that President Ronald Reagan had delivered the year before at Westminster (British parliament) in London. The Endowment had a core program, and then had four what were called core grantees: The National Democratic Institute; the National Republican Institute at the time, later to become the International Republican Institute; and two other organizations, one affiliated with the Chamber of Commerce, and the last affiliated with the labor organizations. And so, the NED began operating, again, to promote democracy through these various institutes and through its own programs.

A year later, in response to developments in Central America in particular, President Reagan appointed a commission, headed by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, to look into types of programs in Latin America that could be used to support stability there. As part of their final report, the Commission emphasized the importance of administration of justice, and so out of this process initiatives within USAID's Latin America Bureau to focus on administration of justice programs throughout the hemisphere became a precursor for the broader institutionalization of democracy programs at USAID that occurred in the 1990s.

The other events in the mid-'80s that I think led to the internalization of democracy programs at USAID, and within the broader donor community, were several critical, what I'll call, transition elections. And in my mind, the two most notable ones was one in 1986 in the Philippines, a snap election that took place on February 7th, in which, for the first time, there were two U.S. international observer delegations, one organized by the National Democratic Institute, where I served as a consultant, working with the National Republican Institute and utilizing the handbook that I had developed.

And the elections were significant because they were an example of a government, an incumbent government, basically trying to remain in power through an electoral process, even though the majority of the population had voted against the ruling party. And the observers, in this case, both our delegation, which was an international delegation, as well as a delegation led by Senator Lugar of Indiana, both concluded that the elections were unfair and that the ruling party lacked any legitimacy.

This was then followed by what became known as the People Power Revolution, which ultimately resulted in the President of the United States telling the then-president of the Philippines, Ferdinand Marcos, that his time was up, that he had to leave the country, and that the person who had opposed him in the election would assume power, Corazon Aquino. And so that what was not only, obviously, a momentous occasion for the Philippines, but also a realization of how international observation of elections and pressure on governments to conduct the elections fairly could have broad impact.

The second election, or electoral event, that took place in the 1980s that I think also had a very dramatic effect was in Chile in October 1988. This was a plebiscite basically on whether the general, Augusto Pinochet, who had overthrown the democratic government of Salvador Allende back in 1973, should be allowed to remain in power for another eight years. This is per the constitutional procedure rules that had been put in place by Pinochet in the early 1980s, and initially the question was whether the opposition would participate in what seemed like a quite bogus effort at conducting an electoral event. They were encouraged to do so, and ultimately united to form the “campaign for the no vote” to vote against Pinochet. The campaign received a lot of support from the international community, and particularly from the United States, through USAID to the National Democratic Institute, which provided technical assistance to the NO campaign, and really bolstered their efforts by helping them with public opinion surveys.

NDI also organized a large international observer delegation, this time led by the former president of Spain, Adolfo Suárez. And the no vote succeeded. Pinochet was forced to accept the result, and a year later, Chile had its first of its democratic elections, which have now taken place, per the Constitution, as required every five years. Chile is recognized as a fairly stable democratic country, but it emerged from this flawed plebiscite process. But more important from our perspective is it, again, showed the international community that this type of democracy support assistance could have not only micro impacts, but could really transform a country from authoritarian to more democratic rule.

There were a couple of other interesting elections in Latin America in 1989 and 1990, in Panama and Nicaragua, but the most dramatic event of this period was the fall of the Berlin Wall, which took place in November 1989. And then, between April 1990 and June 1990, during a six-week period, elections took place in virtually all the former Warsaw Pact countries that had been liberated by the fall of the Berlin Wall. Congress, meanwhile, had passed legislation that supported democracy programs in the former Warsaw Pact countries.

Among those programs were programs to support the electoral processes in those countries, including sending international observers to each of those elections. I was working at the time with the National Democratic Institute, and we observed elections often with our Republican counterparts in each of those countries. Following the elections, I and a colleague co-edited a book [The New Democratic Frontier] that described the experiences of what had happened with each of the elections in these countries, as well as critical thematic considerations that countries undergoing transitions should take into account. And again, by diving into these issues, we got a better sense of what types of assistance were useful, and how we could most effectively provide the assistance.

A year later, the Soviet Union fell apart and again Congress responded by approving an assistance program for the 15 former Soviet Union countries that now emerged, which included both an economic reform component and a political reform component. And so those became the mainstay of the U.S. government's assistance efforts in the former Soviet Union.

So this is now 1991, and each of these programs were being implemented with State Department supervision at USAID, but in a sort of very regional approach. So each region had its own team working on democracy programs. So I've talked about Latin America, and I've talked about Europe and the former Soviet Union. There were also, as I said, the Philippines and a couple of other countries in Asia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, where there were some democracy programs. And then last to the table were programs developed in Africa - obviously, there were a lot of countries and a lot of development programs, and so slowly, as the democratic wave began moving towards Africa, and as the idea of democratization became more recognized and internalized within development circles, the Africa Bureau also began initiating democracy programs.

In 1993, President Clinton took office, and he appointed as the USAID Administrator Brian Atwood. Brian had been my boss at the National Democratic Institute, where he had served from 1985 to 1993, and so he came to USAID with this idea that it was critically important to incorporate democracy as part of international development assistance programs more broadly. So he came up with the idea of having four specific areas of focus, for the agency. Population, health, nutrition was one. A second one was economic development, the third was the environment, and the fourth was democracy and governance.

To institutionalize this within USAID, the first part was to develop a strategy for the sector. And so, by September 1993, we had published, as part of a broader *Strategies for Sustainable Development*, a specific strategy for our democracy and governance programs. But that didn't do enough. First of all, it didn't necessarily bring the agency's different bureaucratic components, the different regional bureaus, together.

So I arrived at AID in September 1993 as a political appointee with the mandate of helping Brian to internalize democracy programs into the agency mainstream. When I arrived, I discovered that there was what we called a Tuesday group, which brought together on a weekly basis the democracy officers from the different bureaus and which functioned as a brainstorming session.

I continued that process as I thought it was a wonderful innovation, helping all of us think through many of the issues that we were now confronting as we were moving from an ad hoc to a more institutionalized process.

So, in addition to the strategy that was adopted in 1993, the next year the agency set up a number of what we called Centers of Excellence to cover the various sectors that the agency would be working in, including a Democracy and Governance Center for Excellence. I was designated as the co-acting director of the Center for the first, six, seven months, as we were putting it into place. Initially, we had just me and the other acting director, and another political appointee, and a couple of other folks, as part of the new Center. And so we needed to recruit both internally from the various regional bureaus, and also, new hires. But it was a slow process, and so we built it up over time.

Parallel to the center, Brian also created what was called the Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), which was designed to provide rapid response support in instances where there was a transition from authoritarian to democratic rule, or in a post-conflict situation. And the idea initially behind OTI was that it would really be able to respond quickly without some of the bureaucratic barnacles that often stymied implementation of “mainstream USAID development programs.”

So those two institutions emerged in parallel. Both were set up in 1994. The Center established four areas within the democracy sector that it would focus on. Rule of Law, which grew out of a lot of the experiences that the agency had already accumulated from Latin America. Election and Political Processes, which drew on the experiences from the work that had been done by organizations like NDI, and what was now called the International Republican Institute, and the International Foundation for Electoral Systems, which was established in 1987. A third area was Civil Society. And the fourth area was what we call Governance. And those four areas basically stayed as the core sectors of USAID democracy work, from the initiation until there was a new strategy adopted in 2013, 20 years later, and I'll mention that document before I close.

The other piece of work that USAID sponsored at the time was a series of evaluations. These were evaluations of specific democracy and governance sub-sectors. I remember when I first arrived at USAID, there was an evaluation of rule of law programs that USAID had conducted over the previous year. One of our first Tuesday group sessions that I chaired reviewed the rule of law evaluation and considered the implications for future programming. We ultimately did six different evaluations in this sector, focusing on legislative strengthening, civil society, elections, local government, and a couple of others. They were very informative, influential, and impacted on our work.

While we were institutionalizing this work at USAID, other donors were thinking similarly. The Development Assistance Committee, which operates under the broad OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) umbrella, focusing on the development communities of donors, had set up a working group called *Participatory Development and Good Governance*.I represented USAID on this committee, and we produced several documents, both

principles and mechanisms for evaluations, that reflected this broader donor engagement on issues of international democracy assistance. So it wasn't only the United States, but it was also other countries that played a role in this evolution.

Two other points to close out the 1990s. One, there were a series of conflicts that had been going on for a while that were resolved. Mostly, the impetus was the end of the Cold War and the fall of the Berlin Wall. But as part of these conflicts coming to a close, there were often elections and efforts at institutionalizing democratic processes that were part of the post-conflict process, and that the international community, including USAID, played a big role. So you can think of places like Nicaragua in 1990, where the UN, for the first time in its history, actually sent observers to a sovereign country, that is, a country that wasn't a territory, and basically set a precedent for the UN becoming involved in these issues. And then there were a series of elections in Cambodia, El Salvador, Mozambique, Angola, all of which had an international component, with the UN supervising the process, facilitating the presence of observers or providing technical assistance, and where the UN apparatus worked closely with the bilateral donors in supporting specific activities related to helping these countries move from conflict to a post-conflict environment.

And the culmination of these processes was the Dayton Accords, signed in 1995, but basically implemented, during 1996. Here, the key actor was not the UN, but the Organization of Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), which included 54 countries, everything from the former Soviet Union, all of Europe, plus the United States and Canada. And the OSCE was tasked with, supporting the Dayton Accords, de-conflicting the different forces that had bitterly fought for the previous three years in Bosnia, setting up a human rights mechanism, and perhaps most important, implementing the provisions regarding elections, which initially were supposed to take place within 6 months, and then were postponed and took place within 9 months.

There were lots of challenging issues that arose in the context of the Bosnia elections. Again, the U.S. role included providing assistance to the process. I was working at USAID and I was detailed to support the OSCE as an advisor, but the OSCE had a full-time team and was headed by a former American diplomat, Robert Frowick, who was responsible for ensuring that the provisions of the Dayton Accords were implemented. Following the Bosnia elections, a colleague of mine, to mark the end of an era, put together an edited volume describing all these different experiences in these various countries that had gone through during the post-conflict process. The book - Postconflict Elections, Democratization, and International Assistance - was published in 1998.

The other event to note from the 1990s was, or more properly dialectic that emerged with the establishment of the Democracy Center and with the inclusion of democracy and governance as part of USAID. There was this tension between should democracy governance be about programming— those four areas that I mentioned as being core programs—or should it be about trying to influence political reform in the countries where we were operating, whether we were talking about health programs or economic development programs. In other words, was the critical point ensuring that good governance principles were being respected, that things

were being done transparently, that corruption was kept to a minimum, and that there were accountability mechanisms, all which impacted the entire development portfolio. And so that was a tension that emerged early on between, are we about programs, or are we about bureaucratic influence? I think for most of the period, then and subsequent, most of the people who worked in the democracy sector focused on programs. And even though they were aware of and wanted to influence their colleagues regarding these issues, for a variety of reasons, their focus was programmatic

And the last thing I'll say about the 1990s is that the Democracy Center, which had started in 1994 with five people, by the end of the 1990s, had probably 60, 70, staff and ultimately expanded to several hundred staff before USAID was dismantled. A whole backstop for democracy and governance officers was established, with some of the officers coming from other sectors with a commitment to work in this area. A whole set of training programs and handbooks were created and later expanded upon as the sector went into other areas of work.

So let me, somewhat telescopically, talk about the last 25 years. I was less directly involved, but was involved in a couple of key aspects. And I'll just mention four specific issues.

So one was, there was always this question about “how do we evaluate our democracy and governance programs.” In 2006, USAID invested in a project that was assigned through a grant to the National Academy of Sciences, to create this panel of experts, of six people. I was out of government at this time, but I was selected as one of the six experts, and we produced a couple hundred-page report on how evaluations had been and should be conducted at USAID in the future: Improving Democracy Assistance: Building Knowledge Through Evaluations and Research (2008). I then went back into government in 2009 and was able to use some of what had emerged from this expert panel in terms of informing the work of USAID, and not just in the democracy sector but more broadly on evaluations.

Second, in the 2000s, there began to be a much more sophisticated look at how donors should use what we now call political economy analysis to inform their programs. And although political economy analysis is a generic assessment tool, the democracy and governance staff at USAID and at other donor organizations began to own this assessment tool, and that became a big part of their work, of trying to analyze the political economy of the countries where USAID was working for purposes of ensuring or encouraging better development outcomes.

A third area that I'll mention is corruption, or better anti-corruption. Again, goes way back. There have always been anti-corruption programs, with people complaining about corruption in different countries settings, and how that inhibits development. There was a big push at the World Bank in the 1990s under its then-president James Wolfensohn to introduce anti-corruption programs at the World Bank. And at USAID, it grew, and ultimately, during the Biden administration, USAID actually created a center for anti-corruption work, and that became one of the areas of focus for the entire agency.

As I said, a new strategy was adopted in 2013, which went away from the four specific programmatic areas and talked more generally about outcomes that USAID was trying to encourage. Once published, there was an effort to internalize within the agency. It introduced, for the first time, a very explicit focus on respect for human rights as one of the outcomes that USAID was trying to promote. Also, a specific emphasis was the increased use of political economy analysis across the board and the integration of political thinking into USAID's development programming more broadly.

And then the last area that I'll mention is about technology. I started in the dark days of the 1980s, when fax machines were considered a revolutionary technology. We've seen advances of technology, which has affected both how we take advantage of the different forms of technology to implement programs more effectively, as well as the context in which we're implementing programs, which is, you know, much more affected by different technological advances. So, today concerns about issues of disinformation, and manipulation of data based on technology, inappropriate uses of technology - all these factors definitely shapes consideration of how development programs are implemented.

All this leads up to what was an incredibly robust democracy and governance sector in the 2020s. President Biden emphasized these programs. There were a couple of summits that he hosted on democracy issues. And like I said, the number of democracy offices had grown considerably, the resources that were available for USAID democracy programs had increased dramatically, and then it all came to a crashing halt with the dismantlement of USAID in 2025.

We are still figuring out what the next steps are going to be: How many programs are the State Department going to be able to implement in this sector? Can the National Endowment for Democracy, which has so far survived, what type of programming can it continue? And how much can private foundations pick up with respect to this type of work to fill the gaps that have been created by the dismantling of USAID?