

Transcript

Liza Prendergast: Greetings! My name is Liza Prendergast, I'm Vice President at Democracy International, and I'm here to have a conversation with Eric Bjornlund about Democracy International's story as an organization and its role in the democracy space. So, I'm pleased to introduce Eric Bjornlund, who is president and co-founder of Democracy International. Eric, tell us more about your background and how you ended up in this field of work.

Eric Bjornlund: I'm a lawyer, and I was working at a large law firm, doing mostly corporate and transactional work in the 1980s, but I had the opportunity to do some pro bono work in the human rights area. One of the projects I worked on was in Namibia, which was then controlled, illegally under international law, by South Africa. There was a reason why legal support about U.S. legal cases was going to be helpful in human rights cases in Namibia, and I got very involved in that and very committed to it. And a few years later, in 1989, when Namibia embarked on its transition to independence that was supervised by the United Nations, I became acquainted with the National Democratic Institute, NDI, which was working to support that transition. I had the opportunity to go to work there, and I loved that, and I never went back to law practice. I spent the next 11 years working at NDI around the world, especially on election-related programs.

Liza Prendergast: So where did the idea for starting Democracy International come from, and why did you start the organization?

Eric Bjornlund: There were a lot of ways in which the democracy promotion field was really new and evolving in the 1990s. [Democracy promotion] had historically been more k aspirational government rhetoric and public diplomacy [that] was thought of as democracy promotion, but in the 1980s, and especially in the 1990s, it became apparent that you could have more meaningful technical assistance that was focused on particular institutions and partners and democratic problems. And the field really took off, and it attracted a lot more funding and a lot more policy influence. As this was happening, we became aware that there needed to be better analytical work, that there was a real need for improving analysis and thinking that goes into democracy program design and implementation. And, with some colleagues, I thought there was an opportunity to do that. We thought that the U.S. government needed to have sharper assessments and more honest evaluations and better evidence-based programming, and [we] thought there was an opportunity for an organization to do that.

Liza Prendergast: Do you think that your assumptions were largely correct, and how did you find the analytical work in those early years?

Eric Bjornlund: Well, I think one of the things we didn't know what we didn't know about [was] government contracting, so we had to really learn about procurement processes and how to really compete in that sphere, but we were able to do that. We had the opportunity, which was quite fortunate, to win the democracy and governance analytical services framework contract, called an indefinite Quantity Contract, which put us in a position to be one of the preferred providers to USAID to do analytical work. And over the next years, we ended up with a steady stream of

assignments doing analytical projects, evaluations, assessments, applied research, [and] survey research for USAID. And this became what we did, and we thought we did it quite well.

Liza Prendergast: And what impact do you think the studies and the research had?

Eric Bjornlund: Well, I think we did very good work that had a lot of impact at USAID and helped the design of programs and the thinking about what was effective in democracy and governance assistance. It was very much focused on the government, it was not something that [had] a public platform, mostly because the government was our client. So we didn't have that opportunity. But we did develop a relationship of trust with the U.S. government. I think we developed a reputation with them for analytical rigor and intellectual honesty and practical insights, and that was very gratifying.

Liza Prendergast: You and your co-founder, Glenn Cowan, came from a background specifically focused on elections and election monitoring in particular. You wrote a book on the topic. But DI's work was largely in the analytical space. How did you stay engaged in the election space as well?

Eric Bjornlund: My colleague, Glenn Cowan, who's the principal co-founder with me of the organization, had essentially invented Parallel Vote Tabulations, which [are] a very sophisticated way of assessing the credibility of vote counts in contested electoral environments, particularly in transition environments. He really came up with that for the plebiscite in Chile in 1988, and he'd been very influential in [developing] the methodology of election observation. As you mentioned, I wrote a book about the emergence and significance of election monitoring, both international and domestic. We were very committed to election integrity. Most of our analytical work wasn't about elections, but we had the opportunity to continue to work with our friends at leading election monitoring and election integrity organizations: NDI, where we had worked previously, the Carter Center, [and] the Asia Foundation, among them. I worked on a long-term program in Indonesia for the Carter Center. We worked on PVTs [Parallel Vote Tabulations] in a number of countries—notably, Mozambique comes to mind—and we were able to continue an involvement in election observation, even as we were an analytical organization.

Liza Prendergast: And picking up on that, DI made a fundamental transition to being an implementing partner of the U.S. government, largely in 2008. I was wondering if you could talk about the transition to becoming an implementing organization, particularly when the U.S. government invited Democracy International to deploy election observers in Pakistan.

Eric Bjornlund: That was one of the really transformative opportunities that we had in the history of Democracy International. We founded it formally in 2003. In 2008, so after 5 years of doing analytical work, but as we were saying, keeping our hands in election integrity-type programs, we had the opportunity to organize observers in Pakistan. Benazir Bhutto, who was the most well-known political leader of Pakistan, and someone who carried a lot of international hopes for the promise of democracy in Pakistan, was assassinated, and there was a big focus on elections in February of 2008.

One of the established organizations that traditionally did election monitoring with U.S. government funding decided that the environment was not safe for international observers. We also think they were concerned about the political environment, which might force an independent organization to make judgments that either the government of Pakistan or the government of the U.S. might not be entirely happy with, may [also] have influenced their decision, but they pulled out of organizing the observers for the election. At the last minute, we got calls from the State Department [and] USAID, and they said, are you an election monitoring organization? Could you actually organize observers in Pakistan?

The number of organizations that do this kind of work historically was not large, and others were not available, and we decided that we could do it. I have often said that it was kind of like the Blues Brothers coming out of prison, that they needed to get together the old band. So that's what we did, we found the people we had worked on election observation programs in the 1990s, and found out where they were, and asked them if on a week's notice or less, they were willing to go to Pakistan and observe elections in a potentially insecure environment. And we were able to mobilize people, get them on the plane, figure out how to pay for it, raise the cash, which was a challenge, in very trying circumstances. And I think in a lot of ways, that decision and that program catalyzed a fundamental reinvention of what we were about.

It also was very gratifying. We dealt with a lot of important policy makers. One was a bipartisan delegation of U.S. Senators that was led by then-Senator Joe Biden--we also [met with] Senator John Kerry and Senator Chuck Hagel--that we had the opportunity to spend some time with. And I remember them saying to us, we would like to really thank you for what you're doing for your country by stepping up and doing this, and I still have warm feelings about, being thanked by them. I'm sure it wasn't special to them, but it was special to us.

Liza Prendergast: It really reflects the sort of bipartisan support that has existed for the U.S. role, and the role of U.S. organizations in conducting international election observation missions.

So, I'd like to pivot, Eric, a bit. Democracy International, of course, worked closely, as you mentioned, with traditional democracy promotion organizations, but it's also competed with really established organizations. Could you talk a bit more about how Democracy International has evolved and competed in the elections and political processes area in particular?

Eric Bjornlund: Yes, as I mentioned, there were a relatively small number of organizations that had experience, that had U.S. government funding and backing to do that kind of work, especially at that time, talking after 2008. But we had proved ourselves capable of dealing with the challenges of working in very tough environments, particularly conflict-affected environments. We did really well in doing that in Pakistan, and navigating politically a tough situation and a challenging security environment. And we had the opportunity to do that the next [year] starting in 2009 in Afghanistan, which was a war-torn country with a very difficult security environment and lots of challenges, and we were able to organize an important project supporting elections and civil society in Afghanistan that we ended up continuing to work [on] that country for the next decade.

And we showed ourselves able to manage long-term programs, complex programs, large programs in very difficult environments. And as there were occasional opportunities to compete for elections and political processes kind of work, we did so and we were quite successful in the times when there was an opportunity to compete. So we began working in Bangladesh in 2011, where we have an office to this day and continue to work in supporting political processes in Bangladesh. We were able to get work in a lot of other difficult places... South Sudan, Egypt, El Salvador, and elsewhere working on elections.

And then in about 2015, we felt that there was a real need to expand the ecosystem of organizations that could work with USAID on elections and political processes, so we led the effort to create a new consortium, Advancing Democratic Elections and Political Transitions, a joint venture of six organizations, the Carter Center, the Asia Foundation, IREX, Freedom House, and World Learning, along with Democracy International, [which together] formed a formal joint venture to compete for elections and political processes programs.

Liza Prendergast: Yes, and the evolution of that partnership continues to this day in terms of the work that those organizations do together.

Eric, you touched on DI's work in conflict-affected environments. I mean, [when] you formed Democracy International in 2003, the world was really different, and I was wondering if you could talk a bit about DI's work, and the evolution of that work, in conflict-affected environments over time.

Eric Bjornlund: Well, we saw that the traditional approach of democracy and governance technical assistance in the 1990s evolved in the 2000s and became much more focused on large conflict-affected programs, conflict environments, [with] larger programs. And DI, as I said, had[earned] a reputation for being able to work in those kinds of environments.

In South Sudan, a very difficult environment, we won in a competitive process [for] what was then the U.S. government's largest democracy and governance support program in 2013, designed to be kind of an ambitious democracy program in a new country. But after the outbreak of civil war in the country, a renewed civil war in South Sudan, the program evolved really substantially to supporting peace processes and the resilience of civil society. We [also] worked after the Arab Spring on a long-term monitoring program in Egypt that dealt with a difficult political environment, and we continue to work in tough places like that.

Liza Prendergast: And maybe I would add to that DI's work on conflict assessments. So one of the requirements that used to be in place for the U.S. government when it was implementing development assistance was to do a conflict assessment to make sure that conflict was not exacerbated by U.S. development efforts. Could you talk a little bit more about DI's conflict assessment?

Eric Bjornlund: We were building on our experience doing democracy and governance assessments. In the early years of DI, the Democracy and Governance Office at USAID developed a structured process for assessing opportunities in the democracy and governance sector, and we organized many of those democracy and governance assessments, [which] typically involved finding people that have expertise in the relevant program areas and in the country and getting them there, and following a structured process, and making policy recommendations to the U.S. government.

That same kind of approach works very well in conflict assessments, and we won a framework contract to do conflict assessments for the U.S. government, for USAID, where we would look at what were the drivers of conflict and [would] inform policy decisions about how U.S. programs would interact with those countries. We did something like 17 conflict assessments over a few years and had a lot of opportunity to interact with the U.S. government on how it dealt with conflict.

And, I should say, we also had a separate framework contract to do rule of law assessments, and did similar efforts focused on the justice sector, the rule of law sector, and made recommendations on interventions that the U.S. could pursue to support rule of law in many countries.

Liza Prendergast: Relatedly, DI also developed a specialization in human rights. I was wondering if you could talk about DI's leadership in the human rights space, and how that's evolved over time as well.

Eric Bjornlund: Historically, human rights were seen as a little bit different than democracy and governance in the ways in which the United States and other organizations supported by the United States pursued those objectives [for] democracy and governance, as I said, we developed a menu of approaches to provide technical assistance to particular institutions and partner organizations in other countries, but there was less of that in the human rights space. It was less government-supported technical assistance. Human rights advocacy was more similar to the way democracy advocacy had been in an earlier era.

That changed. Notably in 2013, USAID decided to reconceptualize its strategy for supporting democracy and governance, and it added human rights as a new pillar of focused attention. It changed the name of the office, later a bureau, from the Democracy and Governance Office to the Democracy, Rights, and Governance Office and added a focus on human rights technical assistance.

We had always thought of ourselves as being part of the human rights community and supporting human rights, but we welcomed that opportunity. And more recently, we won a framework project arrangement to be a principal partner of the U.S. government to support human rights defenders and others under pressure for human rights advocacy in many countries, with targeted emergency support, diplomatic assistance, and the like.

Liza Prendergast: And that program, which we'll talk about in a minute, was one of the programs that was canceled by the U.S. Agency for International Development last year. Could you talk a bit about some of the efforts that DI supported to keep that important work going?

Eric Bjornlund: Well, yes, one of the things that we have done in the last year is support the spin-off of an organization called Global Defenders Collective, which is designed to fill the vacuum left by the U.S. government stepping back from providing emergency support to human rights defenders, often [in] serious jeopardy, whether that's personal or professional jeopardy, or even a threat of being arrested, or worse. And what Global Defenders Collective has done is mobilize diplomatic support from people that often had senior positions, policy-making positions, in the U.S. government, in the State Department [and] USAID especially, to provide emergency advice support, moral support assistance to human rights defenders in trouble. That program, that organization obviously cannot mobilize the scale of resources that the U.S. Agency for International Development used to be able to do, but it has been able to provide emergency assistance to people in many cases, and we hope to continue to scale that effort.

Liza Prendergast: It has also drawn, I think, on the expertise of many who have left government, but who are still deeply concerned about these issues, as you mentioned, and bringing sort of a different sense of volunteerism and support as a human rights community, rather than sort of as a donor relationship, but as a community of people who really deeply care about human rights overseas.

I want to pivot a bit to a different topic, which is [that] DI has taken a leadership role in incorporating social and behavioral science and research from social and behavioral sciences in its programming, and it's really contributed to DI's growth. Could you talk about, sort of the way that DI has done that, and particularly its incorporation of social and behavioral science into governance-related work.

Eric Bjornlund: Well, I think, consistent with our founding commitment to using evidence for better development programming, we recognized at some point that programs that focus on institutional reform and development often fall short because they don't take account of the behavior of human beings. And we learned that there's a lot of opportunities to design and implement better programs if you can draw on insights from social and behavioral science. That means from behavioral economics, from social psychology, from sociology, and other social sciences. There are a lot of insights about how people behave and react to certain incentives that can help design better programs.

We began to recognize that that was particularly relevant in governance programs at some point some years ago, and we invested in internal research capability in this area. We recruited experts, and we developed the capacity to really draw on social and behavioral science as part of our programs.

That predated Samantha Power becoming the administrator of USAID in the Biden administration, but she analyzed the situation similarly and brought a new focus to SBS [Social and Behavioral

Sciences], so it turned out to be something that we were an early mover in and able to use to really, improve programs in certain areas, like local government in Kosovo and civil society in Ghana.

It became something that I think should continue to be a place where our community looks for how to make more effective programming.

Liza Prendergast: And I would add also, in Jamaica, where we worked closely with government officials and civil society organizations to reduce crime and violence using behavioral science, and now the government of Jamaica itself is investing in supporting DI and our important work there using this kind of methodology and approach.

Eric Bjornlund: Yeah, so I think by 2024, we were working across the whole spectrum of democracy and governance programming and democracy, human rights and governance programming. We were working to support civil society, political parties, women's political empowerment, parliaments, local government, anti-corruption, decentralization, [etc.] in ways that were innovative and important, and we felt very good about that. We had grown really substantially, partly, I think, because of the focus on SBS and evidence-based programming, and we're really feeling good about the community we had built of people working with and for our organization around the world, and that has been severely hampered since then.

Liza Prendergast: It has, and we'll turn to that in a moment, but also, I would add that the ethics that you personally bring to this work, and that you and Glenn have brought to this work, and the rigor, I think that's something that I have seen in my arc of working for Democracy International, that it's been really important to building the type of relationships that continue to this day.

So let's pivot to what happened in 2025. The new administration in early 2025 stopped payments to USAID implementing partners for past work, for work done before the administration took office, terminated most USAID programs, and most programs focused on democracy, if not all democracy, human rights and governance, and then dismantled USAID. How have you, and how has Democracy International responded, both in court and trying to pivot to new lines of work?

Eric Bjornlund: The new administration's actions were really a shock. We had survived the first Trump administration, where not all of the administration's priorities would have been exactly the same ones we had, but programs continued, more or less, following the bipartisan support there had been for democracy and governance and human rights assistance over many years. So we were somewhat surprised when programs that had built trust over many years, that had supported human rights defenders, that had protected vulnerable youth, that it assisted communities recovering from conflict, were all abruptly halted, with really dire consequences that are very hard to overstate.

And then for our organizations, like many other implementing partners of USAID, as you alluded to, we had to lay off employees and terminate relationships with subcontractors and grantees, vendors, and employees around the world, which was a really, really difficult process.

But among other things, the administration, as part of their pause of foreign assistance, somebody interpreted that as not paying for work that had been completed before they came to office, because they had different priorities going forward. We felt it was obvious that that was not legal or acceptable, and there didn't seem to be an easy political solution to it, so quite quickly, we joined with some other organizations, it was eight organizations in total, that filed suit in federal district court saying that the termination of these programs was unlawful, violated the Administrative Procedure Act because it was arbitrary and capricious [and] violated the Constitution because the administration does not have the power to ignore congressional appropriations. And we quickly won a temporary restraining order from a federal judge, and then the judge ordered all implementing partners of USAID to be paid for past work.

The administration went to the Supreme Court on an emergency basis, complaining about that. The Supreme Court upheld the judge's power to do that, and he issued a preliminary injunction. And then over the subsequent weeks, the administration had to report to the judge on how it was paying all of the implementers of USAID programs. So we did have success in that case.

The case actually continues to this day. It's been to the Supreme Court three times on an emergency basis over the subsequent months, and it is still in court where we're arguing that the termination of programs and the dismantling of USAID was unlawful, and we have the expectation that this case will continue into the future, probably going back to the Supreme Court. It will be the most consequential case, not only about foreign assistance, but [about] the relative balance of power between Congress and the administration over congressional appropriations and the congressional creation of an independent government agency that cannot be terminated by the administration without a new act of Congress.

So we will be continuing to pursue that case in court. Meanwhile, we've very much pivoted our attention to what we've continued to work on: international democracy, governance, and human rights programs with support from funders in other countries, although on a much smaller scale than what we were able to do with USAID funding. And we've turned our attention much more to the U.S, where we're trying to provide social and behavioral science advice to local governments on how to build trust with citizens and the like. And also, working with other organizations to support election integrity in the U.S.

Liza Prendergast: And I would add as well, I think one of the important things that the payments for the case contributed. We were, as an organization, Democracy International supported the efforts to make development assistance locally led, locally driven. USAID at one point had a localization strategy, and our case also helped all of the organizations that were getting direct funding from the U.S. government, who are not based in the U.S., to be paid for work done. So it really was a really significant, I think, win in that period of time, but as you say, the case is ongoing.

Eric Bjornlund: And it's an unfortunate situation to be in, to have to go to court to try to get legal and contractual obligations honored by the U.S. government, of all parties, and to try to do what we can to save foreign assistance, or to save the opportunity to build it back in the future. That is

one of our most important goals right now, to be part of the process to rebuild support to democracy, human rights, governance, and peace programs in the future. We hope the U.S. will step up again to support those important issues.

Liza Prendergast: Well, I think we'll stop there. Thank you very much, Eric, for sharing the story of Democracy International, and thank you [Georgetown] for inviting us to present.

Eric Bjornlund: Thank you, Liza, and thank you [listeners].