



THE BIRTH OF AN IDEA





The birth of an idea

Bengt Säve-Söderbergh



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Preface

Founded in 1995 by 14 Member States, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance or International IDEA is the only intergovernmental organization with the mission to support global sustainable democracy as its sole mandate. International IDEA focuses on supporting stronger democratic institutions and processes, and sustainable, effective and legitimate democracy.

To commemorate its 20th Anniversary, we look back and reflect on the organization's beginnings and the context for its foundation back in 1995. We asked International IDEA's enthusiastic first Secretary-General, Bengt Säre-Söderbergh, to tell us his story and shed light on how the organization started.

This essay is his personal account of the events at that time. It highlights the political challenges during that period and the bases for the approach to democracy support that International IDEA continues to espouse today.

Democracy cannot be exported. It has to grow from within a society. There is no instant democracy. It is an ongoing process.

I am most grateful to Bengt for his valuable contribution to our 20th Anniversary celebration and I hope you will enjoy reading our story.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Yves Leterme', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Yves Leterme
Secretary-General

The beginning

International IDEA turns twenty. What does that mean? Is it now an adult, a grown-up that has found its ways and means in a world full of uncertainty and new and old challenges? This essay is not an evaluation of what IDEA has achieved during these 20 years. Rather, it is the opposite: the story of how it came into existence: how it was born. What were the thoughts, the preparations and the expectations—and how did it start running? And who were the people who made it happen? I have been asked to describe the very beginning, since I was its first secretary-general and conducted much of the preparatory work.

When trying to jog my memory, I had the pleasure of consulting Sir David Steel, today Lord Steel of Aikwood, and Thorvald Stoltenberg (both members of the first board of International IDEA) as well as Ambassador Lars-Olof Edström, my work companion from the start. I thank them for their assistance.

As far as I am concerned, it is a story that begins many years before the formal founding conference that took place in 1995. It starts before the famous Berlin Wall came down in 1989. At that time we thought we were about to see the beginning of a new world. One with more hope and optimism after the long Cold War, when democracy was said to be the top priority, but when it was sometimes easily sacrificed at the expense of loyalty.

As we progressed in the work of making International IDEA a reality, more and more people got involved, each of whom had their own motives; they all came together in a commitment to work harder for democracy. This essay will mostly be my story, how I was thinking and acting, however I was in cooperation with others who shared these views. If someone else was writing this story, they may tell it differently but arrive at the same conclusions. Creating a new international

organization with a politically sensitive agenda is a difficult challenge. Democracy can be shaped in many different ways. And so can an organization taking on the challenge of contributing to this cause. There was no handbook available. However, we were happy to reach a broad consensus about what we wanted and were committed to.

Those were the days

The years around 1990 were dramatic, to say the least. When historians today try to explain the long trends of history, they tend to look at 1990 as one of the major turning points. A year that changed so much, not only in people's minds but also when describing power relations around the world. I will discuss some of the major events around 1990 below, but first I would like to mention some parts of my own background that help explain why I was thinking about democracy long before that year. And my hope that one day we would be able to do more in this field through international cooperation.

Since the late 1960s I had had the privilege of working in the field of international development cooperation, in the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, at the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), at the Swedish Confederation of Labour and by being the first secretary-general of what is now called the Olof Palme International Center. When it was created in 1978 and I was appointed to run it, it was called the International Center of the Swedish Labour Movement and Olof Palme was the chair of the board. It was then the first organization in Sweden modelled somewhat along the lines of the German foundations linked to the different political parties, like the Friedrich Ebert Foundation. One of the major tasks at this centre was to support organizations struggling for their right to independence against colonialism and other forms of foreign occupation.

In 1985 I was appointed deputy foreign minister or state secretary in the Foreign Ministry, a post I held until 1991. My major responsibility was international development cooperation, a demanding and inspiring task that put me in contact with many committed persons in all regions of the world. I had the privilege of carrying out this job during a period when so many historic events took place. Sweden had a fairly long tradition of supporting organizations working against dictatorship,

colonialism and racial discrimination, to make them free, or at least more free than before, and able to decide their own destinies. Around 1990, quite a few of these often-long efforts resulted in success.

Solidarność, formally an effort to establish a trade union movement independent from the communist government in Poland but in reality a liberation movement, carried out its struggle throughout the 1980s against many odds. I was a central part of a number of support activities. In 1989 Solidarność finally managed to reach an agreement with the government to organize multiparty elections, which they won. The first non-communist government was installed. I had the privilege of accompanying the Swedish prime minister when he was the first foreign prime minister to visit this new Poland. I was of course extremely pleased that this remarkable transition happened peacefully, but I was also thinking about how the transition to democracy could be handled after so many years of communist rule. And while we were celebrating the Polish success, one country after another in Central and Eastern Europe changed face. The communist rule came to an end. And two years later the Soviet Union itself became history. A large number of new countries were born with a most unclear future.

Chile had been struck by a military coup against the elected government in 1973. General Augusto Pinochet established himself as a dictator for more than 15 years. The resistance was huge, and finally managed to win a referendum in 1988. A new democratic government was able to take over, but with different strange conditions imposed by Pinochet, including control of the budget. In 1990 I visited Chile and had the honour of signing an agreement with the then Minister of Education Ricardo Lagos, enabling him to start renovating schools that had been run down. I wondered then how Chile would manage to simultaneously build a democratic future and deal with the past, being a very divided country. While this was happening in Chile, Brazil, Uruguay and Argentina were on a slow, difficult road toward democracy after having suffered similarly cruel military coups and dictatorships.

Part of my job in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs was to act as the Swedish governor of the Asian Development Bank. The People's Republic of China had applied for membership of the bank as part of

its historic transition to a market-oriented economy. China was to host the annual meeting of the bank in 1989, which had been agreed long in advance to take place in May. At the time of this decision the Chinese Government had no idea that it would coincide with the great student uprising. Just a few days before our arrival, Soviet General Secretary Gorbachev had to cut short his visit to China because of conflict, uproar and confusion. Behind the scenes, the Chinese leaders were in constant debate over how to deal with all these students in Tiananmen Square demanding openness and democracy. As a governor I was assigned a student as my guide, a young person who was very excited about what was going on and definitely not behaving how the authorities had instructed her. In addition to the formalities, I had the privilege of meeting with her friends, who were so full of hope of a different future. A few days after my return from the meeting we received the sad news of the violent crackdown on the demonstrators and the ending of their hopes. It was extremely sad and disappointing, but I was—and still am—convinced that the thoughts and hopes of these young people would not disappear forever.

In 1978 I had paid a visit to South Korea as part of a trade union delegation. At the time, a military dictator ruled the country and we were not seen as welcomed guests. We were told by most so-called observers that this country would never become a democracy, simply because the culture and traditions were different from Western ideals. Kim Dae-jung, who had spent much of his adult life in prison because of his struggle for democracy, was considered an idealist and a stranger in his own country. People thought that he would never become a politically important person. A short time after our visit, he was sentenced to death but was miraculously saved, partly by protests from persons such as Ted Kennedy, the Pope and Olof Palme. By the late 1980s he was back as an opposition leader and, as we all know, in 1998 he became the president of South Korea. The group of ‘realistic observers’ from earlier decades had been wrong in their forecasts.

11 February 1990 was a historic day for South Africa and, I would say, the whole world. Nelson Mandela was released after having suffered 28 years in prison because of his belief in (and struggle for) the rights of every person in South Africa, independent of race and colour. Four

weeks after his release, his first visit outside Africa was to Sweden. He wanted to see his old friend Oliver Tambo, who upheld the leadership of the African National Congress during Mandela's imprisonment. He also wanted to thank the government and the people of Sweden for their long support of the struggle against apartheid. He spent a whole week in Sweden. I have strong memories of his discussions with the Swedish prime minister about the future of his country. He had been freed from prison, but enormous challenges laid ahead. Negotiations with the apartheid government were underway, which they hoped would lead to an agreement to organize free and fair multiparty elections. Beyond that, the greatest and most difficult task was to find ways toward peace and reconciliation in a deeply split society, and to create one nation and democracy. What were the choices, and who was able and willing to support them?

In other parts of Africa, where independence had been achieved several decades earlier, the established form of government had been a one-party state, in which opposition was banned or at least quite marginalized. Due to the lack of accountability and transparency, this way of running a country was often misused and therefore more and more questioned. What was there to replace it? Some argued that democracy is to be seen as a universal norm, whereas others claimed that this focus on individuals did not match the traditions and cultures in most of Africa. Discussions of this kind also took place in parts of Asia with similar arguments. Given the history of colonial suppression, and that most of those advocating democracy originated from the former colonial countries, it is not difficult to understand this initial suspicion. Their arguments against democracy can be summed up as: 'We have to focus more on economic development and think in terms of groups and collectives. We must allow a sometimes more authoritarian way of governance.' Among others, Professor Amartya Sen argued strongly against this view, referring to his native India, the second-largest country in Asia and a recognized democracy.

These were some of the dramatic events I personally saw or was part of. Others could be added. What they all have in common is that those who had struggled and achieved an initial victory were now faced with new and very different challenges.

Another complex issue was how to transform a movement focused on total unity into one that not only tolerated but also welcomed dissent. This is particularly difficult if the fight for liberation had involved armed struggle. People needed good advice about a number of choices that had to be made in order to make democracy work—not only newcomers, but also countries where democracy was in place but certainly could be improved. Could we learn from the experiences of others in a more organized and trustful way?

Reactions and responses

With all these dramatic events in country after country, what were the reactions and what happened? Of course the most important reactions were those within the countries going through their own domestic dramas. The old rulers were trying to adjust, with the hope of staying on top—sometimes successfully, but just as often their manipulations were revealed by angry citizens. There were questions about the principles related to and the possible effects of introducing democracy. For example, does democracy more or less automatically produce wealth and a good life for the citizens, the way it seems to have done in established democracies? After all, most of the democratic countries are fairly rich. Or is this idea of democracy just another trick by those who colonized us? Is democracy expensive? Can a poor country afford such a thing as democracy? What kind of support and advice is available? Who should we ask? Is there any reliable organization to work with? These and many other questions were quite frequently asked in countries that had never been close to democracy and now had the opportunity to look to a different future.

In 1991 professor Samuel Huntington published his famous book about what he called ‘the third wave of democratization’. More than 60 countries had become democracies or were taking steps to achieve democracy since 1974, when a military coup in Portugal ended decades of fascism and later resulted in democracy. In this book he presented his analysis of why this was happening at that time, and what the main reasons were. It was not uncontested, but his book had a strong impact on everybody who was interested in and concerned with how the new opportunities should be seized. One year later Francis Fukuyama published a book, the title and content of which has been widely quoted, and criticized or supported. *The End of History* claimed that with the collapse of communism, liberal democracy was the final form

of government. Regardless of what you may think of his thoughts, it was yet another sign of the optimism prevailing at the time.

Up until this point in history, elections and democracy were seen as very national questions, partly out of fear that more powerful countries would have too much say in other nations' domestic affairs. This suspicion and fear were shared not only by many new nations that had been colonized or had suffered other kinds of imperialistic ambitions, but also by many nations in which the idea of democracy had won many years ago. The issue was hardly ever on the agendas of international organizations. International cooperation in support of democratization was rare.

In 1991, Swedish Prime Minister Ingvar Carlsson gathered a large number of leaders from all around the world to discuss what should be done in the new international situation. They produced a report called *Common Responsibility in the 1990s*, which recommended 'strengthening of independent international institutions that offer to monitor countries' observance of democratic rules and principles, in particular at time of elections, respecting the constitutional order of each country'.

The situation was new, and opportunities for making progress in promoting democracy were there. What could the various international and regional organizations do?

What about existing international organizations?

The United Nations (UN), originally established to deal with conflicts between nations, had become involved in dealing with violent conflicts that took place more or less within nations.

Cambodia was one case. Negotiations in 1991 led to a decision that a UN mission would be in charge of the country during 1992–93 leading up to the first free elections, whereupon the UN would withdraw and responsibility should return to the Cambodians who were elected. This was an enormously complicated and sensitive task for the UN. Would this very expensive short-term operation lead to democracy, or at least a beginning?

Namibia in Southern Africa had long been a protectorate of South Africa despite decisions in the UN that this status should be terminated. The inevitable liberation struggle finally led to victory. An agreement was reached that the UN would organize elections in 1990 and then leave.

Similar agreements were reached at this time in connection with the conflicts in Angola and Haiti. Very few were successful, partly because the UN mandate was restricted to short periods leading up to elections.

The UN is and shall remain an organization of all countries. This means that it has quite a few members that do not subscribe to a recognized idea of democracy. Chances to achieve a broad consensus on this subject are not possible, even if quite a few programmes and projects could be undertaken with the purpose of promoting democracy.

While the UN adopted the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, a crucial cornerstone for democracy, in 1948, several more cornerstones are required to achieve democracy. During the Cold War references to this great statement were not very frequent, I am sorry to say.

Many countries turned to the UN with requests for technical assistance, advice and other kinds of support. By 1992, the newly established UN Electoral Assistance Unit was overwhelmed by requests from more than 30 governments, which had to respond that it lacked the capacity to deal with them all. Most national election bodies in established democracies had constitutional and financial restrictions that prevented them from working abroad. One of the few exceptions was Elections Canada, a body that was both interested in and capable of working outside Canada but, naturally, with limited resources.

The World Bank was originally established to assist in the rebuilding after the Second World War. With decolonization and a large number of new and independent countries, its task was to provide soft loans for investments in poorer countries. It was there to promote economic development. As time went by, its agenda was extended to some social areas such as education and what was labelled 'poverty eradication'. The programmes and projects came to involve a more comprehensive approach to each client. Their country reports had a great impact on persons and organizations involved in international development cooperation, a field in which I had been working for a long time.

The statutes said specifically that 'The Bank and its officers shall not interfere in the political affairs of any member; nor shall they be influenced in their decisions by the political character of the member or members concerned. Only economic considerations shall be relevant to their decisions...'. Many poor countries at this time suffered from heavy debt burdens, particularly in Africa. The World Bank, at that time influenced by the philosophies of US President Ronald Reagan and UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, designed an overall recipe for these countries called structural adjustment programmes. They stressed a strict market economy philosophy combined with advocacy for the smallest possible government machinery. In my view, which is shared by many others, this philosophy meant quite a substantial interference in the political affairs of the countries concerned. While many of these countries certainly suffered under bad governments, the principal question remained.

The country reports were meant to be strictly economic, but as they did not manifestly address political issues, some of their conclusions and recommendations did not reflect the situation of the country. It is interesting to note that many years later, when these programmes had been abandoned, the World Bank conducted an evaluation of the structural adjustment programmes, which reached a very negative conclusion. This philosophy had in many cases caused more harm than good. From then on, each country had to be dealt with on its own merits. By that time the World Bank had included ‘good governance’ as one of its objectives and benchmarks. With China and Saudi Arabia as important members, the word ‘democracy’ did not enter the list of key words in that institution. And this has not changed to this day.

A similar problem to what we encountered with the World Bank was the one Peter Eigen had met. He had a long career in the World Bank but became more and more concerned about the growing problem of corruption. The official response was that corruption was not an issue for the World Bank. He therefore quit his job and started preparing for a new institution. We became very good friends, consulted each other frequently and, after some time, he created Transparency International.

Every country needs to find a balance between what the economy needs and what is demanded from politics—especially if the ambition is to find a way toward democracy.

The Council of Europe had a mandate to defend human rights. How could this organization broaden its mandate to include elections? At the same time, the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), started a discussion to broaden its interpretation of security. After all, human rights was also very much part of its mandate. The two organizations, with partly different memberships, were facing new challenges but were not quite clear on who should be doing what in this broad field of elections and democracy. The new situation in Central and Eastern Europe was the great challenge for them, but their mandate did not extend beyond Europe.

Also in reaction to the fall of communism in Europe, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development was created in 1991. This

bank was instructed in its statutes and mission statement to promote democracy, unlike the World Bank and other regional development banks. Could this new bank be a partner in financing and promoting a broad range of election and democracy projects in the future? And possibly even set a new standard for other development banks?

In the United States, Congress had created the Endowment for Democracy in 1983. Through this endowment the Democratic and Republican parties created the National Democratic Institute and the International Republican Institute, respectively. President Jimmy Carter, after stepping down from the White House, created the Carter Center in 1982 with the tasks of promoting peace and human rights. President Carter became personally involved in many countries, including in election observation projects.

There were efforts and small steps taken here and there, but they were mostly focused on election observation. A number of such short-term missions were dispatched, which were sometimes more successful and sometimes less so. There were many unanswered questions as to how electoral observation should be carried out, particularly when conducted by foreign visitors. Who is responsible, and who is accountable to whom? These short-term missions were focused on what happened on the day of the election, but mostly did not include earlier decisions proclaiming what rules and guidelines should guide the whole process leading up to election day. For example, was there an election commission, who had appointed it, and what rules and guidelines did it work by?

For those of us who wanted to see a more democratic world, something was missing. Was it time for new initiatives?

What about Sweden?

These questions were of course also widely discussed in Sweden. What could be done to support democratic efforts? Parliamentarians from four different parties, who otherwise mostly fought each other, joined forces and presented a motion in Parliament, which discussed many of these new questions and proposed the creation of an international institute for election observation. The motion stated that ‘the issue of election observation should be high on the international agenda. But that is not the case. The UN does not have enough competence and there are no agreed principles regarding how election observation should be conducted. The UN will most probably only be able to play a major role in exceptional cases. Therefore it would be desirable to establish an independent institute for free and fair elections’.

A vote in the Swedish Parliament gave general support to the proposal. A few months later elections took place in Sweden that resulted in a new conservative government. My term as state secretary came to an end, and after been appointed ambassador I returned to being a regular civil servant in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. I was generously offered to be the Swedish ambassador to several interesting countries, but I hesitated. Instead I suggested that I deal with the issues raised in the motion in Parliament, but under certain conditions. One was that I conduct a feasibility study with a secretariat. Another was to widen the focus. Elections are just one part of democracy, and therefore the mandate of the study to be undertaken should also cover the broader field of democracy. At this early stage I did not want to exclude any important part, yet I was perfectly aware that a final recommendation would have to focus on some key issues. My suggestions were accepted, and by the middle of 1992 I got started.

First steps of the Swedish Commission

The Independent Electoral Institute Commission, as we were called, had its secretariat in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. Very early I managed to recruit Ambassador Lars-Olof Edström to work with me in the small working group. He had just returned from being ambassador to Mozambique, one of several countries faced with war instead of democracy after achieving independence. He had previously been deputy director-general of Swedish Sida and had broad experience of working internationally.

The first question we discussed was how to approach this broad agenda. What issues and challenges should we look into, and when? What kind of an organization were we looking for, who would own it, and who should or could finance it? Were we really looking for a new organization? And in what order should we raise different issues?

We were aware that there was no handbook on how to build an international organization. We had to use our combined experience, improvise and consult broadly, first in Sweden and subsequently with many people in various international networks. From my six years in charge of international development cooperation I knew quite a few key persons and had a fairly good idea of what roles the various international organizations played, as well as their potential and limitations.

It is important to keep in mind that staying touch with others in those days was technically very different from today. There was no internet, fax was a novelty and some people were taking the first steps toward learning how to work with a computer. Telephone was important, but very few had access to a mobile phone. Like everybody else in those days, we had only a very vague idea of what the coming communication revolution would mean. And whether it would come.

The first step was to set up a Swedish advisory committee linked to our working group. I wanted to benefit from the experience of others and see to it that our various steps had support outside of our little working group. We included representatives of political parties as well as lawyers, political scientists and human rights activists. Foreign observers in those days were greatly surprised to hear that elections were normally held without trouble in Sweden, but at the same time that there was no election commission. Elections were the responsibility of local administrations, and the Tax Authority was the overall national body in charge. One of the more experienced local election administrators became part of the advisory group.

I was quite aware that when you put forth a new idea, the questions raised by others will not be restricted to the idea itself but will also include many detailed issues on how and when and where. We decided, however, that in this initial phase we would focus all our work on the overall needs, demands and problems. What were the issues, and was there an institutional vacuum? Could and should this possible vacuum be filled by a new actor in the international arena? We wanted to start a broader discussion about the challenges and opportunities of what we hoped was the beginning of a new era.

After a few months of hard work, including initial international consultations and participation in some conferences and seminars, in November 1992 we presented a first position paper that identified three major issues:

1. Demand outstrips supply in the field of electoral support. For example, the UN is overwhelmed by various requests and most national election bodies have limited capacities. But new institutions are not necessarily the answer: can existing bodies be adapted to meet the new challenges?
2. There are conflicting mandates and roles. In a one-party state, the organs of the state, party and parliament are not separated. In a pluralistic democracy, on the other hand, different actors have different mandates and roles, which are not interchangeable. In elections, the ruling government is but one of the actors. Even a

sketchy overview of the available resources and international actors indicates that there are tasks that are currently not performed, and for which existing bodies cannot provide an answer due to limitations in their mandates and affiliations.

3. There is a strong case for a more long-term approach to these issues. Most electoral support so far had been short term and ad hoc in character. Governments, NGOs and some international organizations were almost exclusively focusing their contributions on election observation. Some people jokingly labelled such support ‘election tourism’. Democracy and elections have a lower chance of becoming a sustainable element of governance if external participation and assistance are concentrated on the days around the election itself. When should electoral support begin, and where does the responsibility of the international community end—politically, technically and morally?

The paper then discusses the possible roles and involvement of the UN. Many countries had requested UN support. The secretary-general had presented a report with general guidelines, and a small election unit had been established in the UN Secretariat. The paper also noted some of the limitations of the UN. One stems from its role as an intergovernmental organization, in which countries are represented by their government. An election, however, serves the interests of several different actors with legitimate roles and claims, of which the incumbent government is but one.

The institute should also be based on ownership by several countries in order to make it non-biased. I had seen the activities of the various US-owned institutes and foundations, where too many of the actors believed that the American way of conducting elections and democracy was the only or, at least, the very best way. Much of the rest of the world had a different opinion or felt that there were many other options, for example in choosing an electoral system or what role money should play.

The problems raised in the paper plus a number of other issues linked to the election cycle implied that there may be a case for a new independent

institute. This new institute must be based on a specific concept, which could not be achieved in an existing organization at the time.

After recognizing the important role of the UN and other organizations active in the electoral field, the paper outlined two different potential work areas for a new institute.

First, it recognizes the role of election observation but notes the lack of agreed guidelines, knowledge and accountability. A new institute could network parliamentarians, legal experts and other relevant categories of people from different constituencies. It should also be able to supply a framework for electoral monitoring and support, as well as guidelines and other practical assistance.

Second, the paper notes that there is a dearth of experienced and qualified personnel to draw upon. This is the case both internationally and much more on the national level in the countries requesting support. The institute would establish a databank and collect information and reports relevant to electoral support. This repository of knowledge should be used for practical operations and decision-making. One element of this could be summed up as training, briefing and dissemination. Other tasks could be added, such as technical assistance and advising parties.

Finally, the paper discusses the issue of finance in general terms and states the hope that it would enjoy financing from different quarters in forms that would not jeopardize its independence. Also included were some general questions regarding statutes. Financers must be in a position to exercise control without being directly involved in operational decisions. It also states that no existing body could serve as the natural principal of such an institute.

This paper was distributed widely to politicians and other individuals, governments, international organizations and NGOs. We were pleased to receive a great number of comments, orally and in writing. Most of them were positive and included supportive demands to continue our feasibility work.

One key person at this early stage was Thorvald Stoltenberg, foreign minister of Norway. ‘Everybody talked about the new situation and the new opportunities, but you and your commission had ideas about what to do. I liked that and supported the efforts from the start,’ he says today looking back. I would add that Thorvald, with his personality, had a great capacity to convince other people. The breakfast meetings in his home were well known among people active in promoting new ideas. And our commission benefitted from Thorvald’s way of conducting diplomacy. In those days, a number of politicians were willing to try new ideas and approaches. Australia’s foreign minister was Gareth Evans, who continuously developed new ideas with the motto that Australia should be a good international citizen. Jan Pronk of the Netherlands was another creative politician who was most receptive to what we were trying to develop. In Denmark I had been introduced to the speaker of Parliament, Mr Erling Olsen, who had previously been minister of justice. He declared directly that he was willing to contribute to our work.

Meeting in Geneva

But just receiving written and oral comments on a position paper was not enough. We carried out quite a number of visits and informal meetings in various capitals, which inspired us to continue and further elaborate on our own thoughts as well as ideas and comments received by others. Eventually we felt it was time to organize a first consultative round-table meeting in Geneva, which took place in February 1993. It was a very important moment in our work. I must admit that I was a little nervous. Would there be enough people willing to take part and share their initial thoughts, and what was their interest in what we were doing? We booked a meeting room at the UN that could hold about 60 people.

When at the end of January we counted the number of persons who had announced their participation it was more than 50. We could calm down. We would not be alone at the meeting. At the meeting there were government representatives from Australia, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden, Switzerland, USA and United Kingdom. There were representatives of parliaments from Belgium, Denmark, Mexico, Sweden and United Kingdom. As well as from the Inter-Parliamentary Union, the European Parliament, Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe and the Parliamentarians for Global Action. The UN Secretariat was there as well as UNDP, the European Commission, the International Commission of Jurists and the Commission on Global Governance. Plus a few persons in their individual capacities.

Sir David Steel, former leader of the Liberal Party of the United Kingdom and at the time president of Liberal International, who I did not know from before, had sent us a very supportive letter in response to our position paper and travelled to Geneva. Adama Dieng, secretary-general of the International Commission of Jurists, had also shown a

great interest and volunteered to help us through what we hoped would be the next stage. Sir Shridath Ramphal had been the secretary-general of the Commonwealth for quite some time and had been a member of many different global commissions that were quite common in those days. At that time he was a co-chairman of the Commission on Global Governance. He was enthusiastic about our efforts and took part in the Geneva meeting as well. These three persons with very different backgrounds were later to play key roles in the birth of the new institute.

Barber Conable had just stepped down as president of the World Bank. In my consultations with this bank I had received a clear message that working with elections and democracy was beyond the mandate and statutes of this institution. Conable had to go along with this view when serving the World Bank. But after retirement he stated to me that he personally very much supported our ideas and volunteered to take part in the meeting in Geneva. And so he did.

Optimism and curiosity prevailed during the meeting, which produced a position paper that emphasized three main points:

1. There was a strong case for a new, independent networking and professional institute for electoral cooperation. The points presented in the position paper were well taken. The institute should be global in character.
2. Its work should initially concentrate on a normative and analytical role, which should be combined with an element of observation/verification and capacity building.
3. Some link with the UN was desirable, but it should be conceived in such a way that it did not jeopardize the institute's freedom of operational movement.

Final report of the Swedish Commission

The Geneva meeting, in addition to many other forms of consultation, had given a clear message: that we should continue the work of the commission, broaden the agenda and consult with even more interested partners. The next formal step was to formulate a proposal to the Swedish Government with recommendations on how to move forward. In October 1993 the commission presented its final report, which consisted of 56 pages plus three annexes. Its findings and recommendations were based on consultations with 60 governments, 20 international and regional organizations, some electoral commissions, plus several hundred individuals in their personal or institutional roles. We had been very busy trying to be as inclusive as was technically possible in those days, when the internet was not yet a regular tool for such efforts.

The report noted—as in previous position papers—that the end of the Cold War and other factors had led to an upsurge in the demand for democracy. There was optimism and many expectations, including that democratic values could become more universally accepted. However, there was also a recognition that democracy must grow from within and be supported from below. And that there should be a growing role for actors other than governments: parliaments, electoral commissions, political parties, media, NGOs and other popular movements.

The report categorized the challenges ahead and the largely unmet needs into five categories:

1. The needs and demand for international cooperation far outstrip the supply. The end of the Cold War and a changing perception of sovereignty have paved the way for extended international cooperation on a broad range of subjects.

2. A long-term view is necessary rather than concentrating on or around election day, which had been the custom up until that point.
3. The sensitive nature of electoral cooperation raised the question of who sets the agenda for different phases. Impartiality is highly relevant to the establishment of universally accepted rules and guidelines.
4. With the exception of some international organizations, very few actors work professionally and with a long-term perspective to support electoral processes.
5. International cooperation must reflect the fact that different actors in electoral processes have distinctly different mandates and roles, which cannot be performed by others.

Based on these findings, the commission proposed a flexible, three-part mandate that addressed long-term project requirements:

1. *Normative and research tasks*, which included creating a databank and developing internationally accepted norms, rules and guidelines for election observers as well as for different aspects of electoral processes.
2. *Capacity building, consultancy and assistance* in the form of training and support to national groups involved in the development of rules, guidelines and institutions.
3. *International electoral cooperation* including tasks related to the support and backup of international observers and the exchange of experiences and knowledge in conferences and seminars.

The distinctions between different items naturally had weaknesses. Normative and operational activities sometimes overlap. The right balance had to be struck by the future board of the institute.

At this point in our work—when we seemed to have reached a broad and fairly clear understanding about needs, demand and possible

mandates—we felt that the time had come to provide at least some preliminary ideas about statutes, organization and budget.

Political neutrality and integrity must be safeguarded in the statutes and the functioning of the proposed institute. A special issue was the need to propose a principal for the institute. In this case there were to be several different types of independent institutions involved, not just governments. The suggestion was that the institute be governed by a Board of Trustees comprising three categories of members: (1) financiers, (2) persons with a balance of geographical and professional backgrounds and (3) individuals with their base in the UN and other international bodies. This latter group could, for example, comprise parliamentarians and parliamentary bodies, NGOs, regional organizations and institutions with an international share of activities relevant to the institute. It was deemed too early to suggest a size for the Board of Trustees, partly because it was impossible at this stage to have a clear idea of the number of future members and partners. However, it was agreed that the board should appoint an Executive Committee and a secretary-general.

The proposed institute would bring together governments, NGOs, parliaments and international agencies as equal partners. The commission therefore proposed that the institute be established as a foundation or have similar status, depending on the legislation in the country where it was to be sited.

In addition to these suggestions regarding the formal character of the institute, we also presented a number of ideas about advisory bodies, friends, organizations, contact groups, etc.

We were of course aware of the fact that formal decisions about the work and budget of the institute would rest with future members. But in order to provide inspiration and a glimpse of ideas we had produced or received from all our consultations, we devoted a special chapter in our final report to thoughts about the first three years of operation of the proposed institute. This included the size of the staff, programme costs and fixed costs summing up to estimates of the total costs of establishing and running the institute in years 1, 2 and 3. The grand

total for these three years was estimated at USD 12.8 million. These figures were of course hypothetical, but they gave a rough picture of our thinking and expectations at that time.

Our recommendation to the Swedish Government was to issue invitations to an exploratory meeting, the purpose of which would be to take the initiative a step further in a more formal manner. Invitations should be addressed to bodies that had indicated a willingness to discuss the matter further when approached by the commission in its round of consultations.

Optimally the meeting should result in a negotiated document that could form the basis of an interim board for the institute, which should be vested with authority by the sponsors of the institute to work out in detail its statutes, mandate, organization, etc.

Swedish Government response

Our report was to be presented to the Swedish Government, which was comprised of three parties and had succeeded the Social Democratic Government, in which I had served. Our report was primarily relevant for two Cabinet members. The foreign minister was Margaretha af Ugglas, who represented the Moderates, previously called the Conservatives. I must confess that I was a little nervous before this meeting. However, she received the report with great enthusiasm and stated that our work had her full support. It had so far achieved results beyond our expectations and she recommended that we should carry it on further. The other Cabinet minister was Alf Svensson of the Christian Democratic Party, who was in charge of international development cooperation. He reacted with the same enthusiasm. It was decided that the next step was to issue invitations to a conference in Stockholm in May 1994, hosted by the Swedish Government.

About 15 governments and ten international organizations sent representatives to this conference, in addition to parliamentarians, representatives from election commissions, NGOs and some specially invited individuals, adding up to a total of some 70 persons. UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali sent a personal letter in which he underlined the crucial role of the UN but also stressed that there was a need for an independent and complementary institution, with which UN would cooperate. It is worth mentioning that its Vice President and General Counsel Ibrahim Shihata, who had a broad legal background, represented the World Bank. He praised the initiative but had to declare that the World Bank, according to its statutes, could not be a member. He also declared his personal willingness to assist with advice and added that in his own experience it would be preferable for the institute to be established as an intergovernmental organization instead of a foundation.

As several of the participants had not been part of previous consultations, the focus of the conference was again on needs, demands and possible mandates. Alf Svensson, on behalf of the Swedish Government, said in his introductory speech that 'politically we have received much encouragement from quarters all over the globe. I feel confident that this can be translated into support also in concrete terms to work out the practicalities of the institute. This initiative has the support of all parties in the Swedish Parliament'.

In part of the conference the participants were divided into separate working groups with the task of further refining ideas of tasks and mandates. The conference was conducted in a positive spirit, perhaps inspired by the successful first democratic elections in South Africa in which Nelson Mandela had been installed as president the week before. In order to broaden the platform and speed up the future preparatory work, the conference decided to appoint a working group consisting of Sir Shridath Ramphal, previously secretary-general of the Commonwealth, as chairman, as well as Sir David Steel, UK parliamentarian, president of the Liberal International and previously chairman of the Liberal Party, Adama Dieng, secretary-general of the International Commission of Jurists, and myself.

The new working group

This small group met several times in the period to come. A number of seminars were organized to further refine the mandate and tasks as well as to include other interested organizations and specialists. By October 1994 the working group presented a new report of about 60 pages including further findings and recommendations about the mandate and tasks. In producing this report we had the privilege of including some of the best experts in the field of elections and democracy. It is interesting to note that when our work started two years earlier, much of the focus had been on electoral observation and election day. By this point, however, the suggested mandate was much more on the whole electoral cycle and the broader issues of democracy. This was very much welcomed by those of us who had been part of the whole process. It would not be logical for the institute's mandate to be restricted to elections.

The issue papers in the report outlined the following recommended tasks and mandates:

1. a databank that merges existing data and fills gaps, hopefully using emerging technologies such as email and internet;
2. to serve as a meeting place between researchers and practitioners, compile existing research results, and inspire and conduct research on different issues;
3. develop guidelines and norms, good practices and standards; and
4. provide advisory services, capacity building and training, as democracy and free elections are new concepts in many nations.

The report, which highlighted what needed to be done to support and reinforce the ongoing wave of democratization, further underlined the need for a new institution. Many of the challenges and tasks listed had not been possible to deal with internationally during the Cold War.

Now there were new opportunities, but one had to tread carefully. ‘Democracy cannot be exported, but it can (and should be) supported’, was one of my mottos when working with these matters.

Parallel to the refinement of the mandate, the working group also expended quite a lot of effort in dealing with other issues. But before dealing with statutes and what kind of an organization the institute should be, how it was to be financed, where it should be located and what it should be called, it was urgent to talk to possible members and founders. We were approaching the moment of real negotiations.

We wanted the institute to get started as soon as possible, yet we wanted a critical mass of countries to be the founding nations. We thought that we needed a minimum of 8–10 countries, and we definitely wanted members from different parts of the world. We did not want to give the impression of being a European organization.

Quite a large number of countries had been part of the numerous consultations, but which ones were ready to take the next step, to be one of the founders? Some had given a positive indication at an early stage. Among those were four Nordic countries: Denmark, primarily through the Speaker of the Parliament Erling Olsen, Finland through President Martti Ahtisaari, Norway through Foreign Minister Thorvald Stoltenberg and, of course, Sweden. Similar messages had come from Foreign Minister of Australia Gareth Evans, from Minister Jan Pronk of the Netherlands, and from India, Costa Rica and Barbados. We were very pleased to get positive signals from Chile as well as South Africa, two countries that had just achieved democracy after suffering under apartheid and dictatorship. Belgium, Spain and Portugal were also added to the list. Portuguese Foreign Minister José Manuel Barroso asked me to visit Lisbon to get his positive signal. Fourteen democratic countries from different parts of the world wanted to join, which was exactly what we had hoped for. Canada had been an active part of the preparatory work, but at this point in time suffered from an economic crisis resulting in a political decision by its government not to undertake any new obligations and therefore had to bow out. They were later admitted as members as soon as the crisis was over.

Switzerland declared that it wanted to support the new institute but wished to wait until later to join.

What kind of an organization should the institute be? The idea of a foundation had been tabled earlier but legally this idea proved quite problematic, as this would make it impossible for several countries to be members. The laws of a number of nations did not cover such a legal arrangement. Therefore the working group suggested that the institute should be formed as an intergovernmental organization with statutes that took many ideas from the UN. This was in many ways a practical solution. Otherwise negotiations about legal matters could have taken a long time, maybe years, as is often the case in intergovernmental matters. We wanted to see an early start and we could later draw on many lessons from the UN when it came to establishing staff regulations, a headquarters agreement, etc. These proposals were accepted by those countries that were willing to be founders.

The crucial meeting—London

This decision became the platform for the structure of the overall statutes, which was the first and foremost item for consideration at a meeting at a castle outside London, which was organized early in 1995 to discuss (and hopefully agree on) almost all outstanding matters. The statutes were the first issue that was resolved there in a broad consensus. Governments and intergovernmental organizations were to be members, whereas international NGOs could be associate members. Such an organization must have members from at least seven countries and have a functional and professional role that is relevant to the institute's sphere of activity.

The council was to be composed of one representative of each member and associate member. The institute was to be operated under the direction of a Board of Directors consisting of 9–15 members. The objectives were spelled out in seven categories and the activities in six categories, both of which were very much inspired by the report of the working group in October 1994.

Another delicate matter was finance. A draft memorandum had been presented to the participants discussing various ways of dealing with this issue, based on the experiences of various international organizations. There were three main options:

1. mandatory contributions, assessed either according to a predetermined and agreed formula or as a flat or differentiated fee;
2. negotiated yearly or multi-yearly non-mandatory contributions (e.g., as replenishments); and
3. purely voluntary contributions.

After considering the pros and cons of these different options, it was decided to opt for voluntary contributions but with a strong message of the moral obligation to live up to this part of the membership.

Having resolved the statutes and principles for financing, the conference now had to deal with two outstanding matters: where was this new institute to be located, and what was it to be called?

Regarding the question of location, the working group had asked the prospective founding members to deliver tenders if they were interested. In line with UN practices, this involved both the respective governments and the city where the headquarters were to be located. The established custom was that the host government would have a crucial role in terms of finance and that the city would provide free rent for the office. Three offers were made, the most detailed of which came from Stockholm. Mayor Mats Hult had for a long time been keen for Stockholm to host an international organization, which up until that time was not the case. He had even seen to it that Stockholm had an office and a representative in Brussels. Sweden had just joined the European Union, and that organization had offices in many parts of Europe. The island of Strömsborg was and is property of the city of Stockholm and was vacant at the time. He offered Strömsborg as the location of the new institute, free of charge as international custom stated. The conference participants welcomed this offer with great enthusiasm and all agreed that this was the best alternative.

The working group had deliberately left the question of the name to the end, but more or less asked participants in the various meetings and consultations to think of a suitable name. It so happened that Atul Vadher, political adviser of David Steel, came up with a name at the London conference that everybody could accept and support: the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA). The 14 founding states were to sign the agreed statutes and adopt a declaration. The participants at the preparatory conference could return home pleased to have reached full consensus on all outstanding matters.

Founding conference

The Founding Conference of International IDEA took place on 27–28 February 1995 and involved 14 founding states.¹ The introduction of the joint declaration declared:

The world is entering into an age of democracy. Democratic values are becoming more and more widely accepted. Issues of governance are high on national and international agendas, and in recent years there has been an upsurge in the number of elections worldwide. Transitions to pluralistic systems of government have taken place on an unprecedented scale, reflecting the hopes and aspirations of peoples on all continents for the opportunity to participate in and build a more secure future. The end of the cold war ushered in an era of transformation in some parts of the world. In others it precipitated a remoulding of societies moving toward change for growing domestic reasons. There is now a window of opportunity and hope for democracy, perhaps a unique moment in history to be seized.

The declaration also stated: ‘Inherent in the concept of democracy is that it grows from within and from below rather than being imposed from the outside or from above. The growth of a culture of democracy is an ongoing process. Just as there is no instant democracy, there is no definitive and final state of democracy. Democracy is perishable and has to be sought and created afresh by each new generation.’

The institute’s four initial fields of activity were defined as: (1) the creation of a databank and provision of information services; (2) research; (3) establishing and promotion of guidelines and (4) offering advisory and capacity-building services.

¹ These were Australia, Barbados, Belgium, Chile, Costa Rica, Denmark, Finland, India, The Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, South Africa, Spain and Sweden.

The founding members decided that the institute would be governed by a council, which would decide on overall policies and directions and approve the board. The board would consist of 9–15 persons, appointed in their personal capacity. In order to allow the institute to begin its work, a founding nucleus board was established that comprised Sir Shridath Ramphal, Dr Adama Dieng and Sir David Steel.

All these decisions were taken by consensus, having been well prepared and consulted on in advance. The Swedish Government, after elections in 1994, was now represented by Foreign Minister Lena Hjelm-Wallén of the Social Democratic Party, who hosted the founding conference. As mentioned previously, the initiative to create International IDEA had the support of all parliamentary parties in Sweden. After the formal establishment, the participants had the opportunity to visit Strömsborg, the headquarters to be. It needed some renovation before the small secretariat could make the move a few months later.

The day after the founding conference the small nucleus board had its first meeting. They invited me to take part. At the conference in the UK a month earlier, Sir Shridath Ramphal at one point asked me to leave the room. He wanted to discuss the question of a secretary-general with the representatives of the founding states. He said that there was a choice between taking time, and it could be quite long, to find and recruit a secretary-general or, as he advocated, to get a quick start by asking me to fill this post for the initial years. I understood that everyone supported the idea of getting a quick start.

That is why I was invited to this very first board meeting. Subsequently I was appointed to fill this job. Having been involved with the process of creating International IDEA from the start, I had the privilege of knowing most of the people who had been part of the work and what the thinking had been among those who were keen to see International IDEA become a reality. Through the seminars, conferences and other meetings I had also come to know many experts and other knowledgeable persons who could be useful for the work ahead, as staff members or experts, advisers and consultants.

International IDEA was now a reality. Creating an intergovernmental multilateral organization involved many different steps, many more than we had imagined when we started as a small working group in Stockholm. There were many issues discussed, and even more various legal traps. We were lucky as far as timing was concerned, and we managed to achieve a broad consensus about what and how. Sweden was at the time a member of many intergovernmental organizations located in other countries. But hosting an intergovernmental organization in Stockholm in line with the established practices of the UN and the European Union was a novelty, seen by some as a success but by others as alien to the customs of Sweden.

1995: the first year

Considering that IDEA had been established as an intergovernmental organization, partly modelled on the experiences and rules of the UN, it must be considered quite an achievement to have reached an agreement that allowed work to start on day one. Normally legal and other necessary procedures would require quite a long time between founding and work on the issues. But this rush came with a price. In order to fully function, the institute needed a headquarters agreement agreed with the government of Sweden that was ratified by the Swedish Parliament. A majority of the members also had to proceed to their own parliaments to get their membership ratified. In some cases this could take years, as was later shown.

So what to do? An informal agreement was reached with the Swedish Government that financial transactions technically would be channelled through the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs until the headquarters agreement was duly ratified, which happened in December 1995. In the meantime, member states could make financial pledges that were to be honoured in 1996. The year 1995 was labelled the startup year, whereas 1996 would be year one in terms of operations.

In 1995 Sweden had no experience in hosting an intergovernmental organization of a UN or similar shape. The board and council wanted to employ staff rules similar to the practices of the UN, very much driven by a desire to be competitive with similar intergovernmental organizations and to be able to recruit high-quality experts and staff members. The board in its first year therefore had to devote quite some time to rules and other administrative arrangements. The chair of the board spent considerable time negotiating with the Swedish Government, where many legal and other experts encountered the intergovernmental customs for the first time. Later in 1995 these officials had to deal with the administrative consequences of Sweden's

new membership in the European Union, but I think IDEA was the first to tackle issues with Sweden that were natural in places such as Geneva and Brussels. Since I was a Swedish citizen, I saw to it that I did not participate in those negotiations.

It was only after the headquarters agreement was in place that we could recruit international staff members. During 1995 we had to rely on persons who were willing to take on short-term contracts or work more or less pro bono. The birth of this new organization created a lot of interest and enthusiasm among people and organizations around the world, and mostly we found ways to use their expertise and experience. Moving into Strömsborg and getting the offices equipped with everything from furniture to office equipment was handled with great enthusiasm by persons working on short-term contracts.

The board met several times during this startup year, partly to deal with progress reports and resolve a number of new issues, and partly to prepare for the first council meeting in November 1995, when new board members were to be appointed based on recommendations by a Nominating Committee. The headquarters at Strömsborg were to be inaugurated and used for the first time by both the board and council.

My task, among many others, had also been to visit the capitals of the founding states and to make IDEA known, at least among those who were immediately concerned.

By far the most important task was to identify elements of the future work programme. We organized five different round tables in line with the agenda identified by the board and the founding conference. We were privileged to welcome many of the most renowned experts in various fields. Those meetings generated even more ideas, not just on issues but also on how they should be tackled.

Sweden at that time did not have an election commission, but in many of the member countries these commissions performed many crucial functions in organizing and planning elections. However, until then there was no organized international network of election professionals. Setting up and managing such a network was to be one

of the cornerstones of the new institute. I remember with particular warmth the generosity of the Australian Election Commission, which volunteered to make its staff available for the initial work on this network, which became so important for IDEA.

There had also been high demand for ethical codes and professional rules and guidelines with regard to the election process. My vision was that this network of election experts would eventually be the one to produce them. Doctors and journalists have ethical codes adopted by their own professionals, thus election commissions would be the natural agents to create guidelines for the field of elections. We managed to recruit Horacio Boneo to head the electoral work for the first few years. He had extensive experience in this field and came from the UN Secretariat, where he headed the election unit.

How should countries select an electoral system? Few had understood that this was not purely a technical issue. The choice has a strong effect on the whole culture of democracy. There was an early agreement that a handbook on electoral system design would be quite useful. The work on this handbook started early in 1996 and it became one of the most useful and demanded handbooks that IDEA has ever produced. It was later translated into a number of languages and highly praised by the academic dean of democracy, Professor Robert Dahl. The highly controversial subject of the financing of political parties was an early issue as well. How to define the upper limits of campaign contributions (if any), and how to find funds for a growing opposition when the ruling party commands all or most of the resources?

Similarly, the *Handbook on Democracy and Deep-Rooted Conflict* deserves a special mention. It was initiated at a very early stage and managed by Peter Harris, who had broad experience from his native South Africa, where democracy had succeeded after a very deep-rooted conflict. The handbook explored the difficulties of holding elections more or less immediately after the end of a conflict. A third handbook was about women in parliament, particularly experiences and guidelines. All three were later translated into many languages and used around the world.

Methodologies for training and capacity building were discussed early, and it was stressed that the owners of democracy in individual countries should be the citizens themselves and not just international experts. By November 1995 these and other proposals were presented to and approved by the new council and board.

The board membership was extended to Thorvald Stoltenberg from Norway, Frene Ginwala from South Africa, Erling Olsen from Denmark, Monica Jimenez from Chile, Aung San Suu Kyi from Burma, Henry Forde from Barbados, Colin Hughes from Australia and Moni Malhoutra from India.

This board had its first meeting in February 1996, 'year 1' of International IDEA. Six months later we had a staff of about 30 dedicated persons from different parts of the world and of different ages. International IDEA was fully operational for its first phase.

Stockholm, June 2015
Bengt Säre-Söderbergh

About the author




In March 1995 **Bengt Säve-Söderbergh** became the first Secretary-General of International IDEA, a post he held until 2002.

From 1967 to 1970 he worked in the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida) from where he moved to the Africa section of the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. From 1976 to 1978 he was Research Secretary at the Swedish Trade Union Confederation, with a special emphasis on international affairs. He headed the International Centre of the Swedish Labour Movement, later renamed The Olof Palme International Centre, from 1978 to 1985. Thereupon he was appointed Deputy Minister for International Development Co-operation at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, where he was responsible for Sweden's multilateral and bilateral policies on development co-operation. In 1991 he was appointed Ambassador at the Swedish Ministry for Foreign Affairs. From late 1992 until February 1995 he led a feasibility commission that later resulted in International IDEA.

He has been the initiator of and the Swedish representative in The Nordic United Nations Project as well as the Four Nations Initiative for reform of the UN.

He has been awarded the Order of Companion of Oliver Tambo in South Africa, the Order of Merit for his contributions to the struggle for freedom in Poland by the then President of Poland Lech Walesa. The Parliament of Mozambique has awarded him the Order of Merit for his contributions to combat colonialism and apartheid.

Bengt Säve-Söderbergh, a Swedish citizen, holds a Master of Business Administration (MBA) from the Stockholm School of Economics and has studied at Union College, Schenectady, NY, USA. For more than twenty years he was the President of the Swedish Jazz Federation. He has also been the Chair of a Parliamentary Commission on the future of Swedish museums.



Founded in 1995 by 14 Member States, the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is the only intergovernmental organization with the mission to support sustainable democracy as its sole mandate.

To commemorate its 20th Anniversary, we look back and reflect on the organization's beginnings and the context for its foundation back in 1995. This essay is the personal account of International IDEA's first Secretary-General, Bengt Säre-Söderbergh of how the organization started. It highlights the political challenges during that period and the bases for the approach to democracy support that International IDEA continues to espouse today.

International IDEA

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