



Overview

This Policy Brief focuses on support to democracy within international development aid, drawing its recommendations from a more extended book (*Development First, Democracy Later?* International IDEA, 2014). It also builds on an earlier Policy Brief (*Democracy and the Post-2015 Agenda*, International IDEA, September 2013).

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

Other resources:

- IDEA at the UN: <<http://www.idea.int/un/>>
- IDEA's work on democracy and development: <<http://www.idea.int/development/index.cfm>>
- IDEA's work on citizen led assessments of democracy: <<http://www.idea.int/sod/>>

Democracy within international development aid

Democracy is a recognized international goal in its own right. In the Millennium Declaration, UN Member States commit to spare no effort to promote democracy. Supporting democracy around the world is a cornerstone of the foreign and development policies of many donor countries. Yet democracy support remains a low priority within most international development aid budgets—legislatures and political parties, for example, receive less than one per cent of total development aid.¹ Not only is support for democratic political institutions far down the agenda of development aid, it can also be argued that development aid often undermines democracy by weakening or bypassing a country's national political institutions, such as parliaments.

International IDEA has engaged in various processes to emphasize the importance of democracy support within development assistance. It advocates including democracy in the framework of the Post-2015 UN Millennium Goals for four main reasons.

First, global opinion surveys indicate that people around the world want democracy. Second, despite some authoritarian successes, there is substantive empirical evidence that democracy furthers development goals, even in poor countries. Third, democracy is a recognized international goal in its own right; the Millennium Declaration commits UN Member States to 'spare no effort to promote democracy and strengthen the rule of law, as well as respect for all internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development'. Discussions on the post-2015 development agenda have recognized that progress in democratic governance—particularly in transparency, accountability and the rule of law—is necessary for sustained development progress. Fourth, democracy is the most inclusive political system, and gives people an equal opportunity to participate in, and define, the development agenda.

Therefore, donors and creditors that provide development and democracy assistance should keep the following eight recommendations in mind:

1. In order to be more than indefinite financial contributors to provision of public services in low-income countries, pay more attention to supporting effective and representative political institutions.

2. Find the balance between supporting state capability and state accountability/responsiveness to citizens. Some donors have increasingly focused on 'governance' in aid as a means of achieving development goals, rather than promoting democracy *per se*. As a consequence, governance support has often been about insulating state bureaucracies rather than promoting representation and political choice.

¹ OECD/ODA statistics



‘Without freedom of speech I cannot talk about who is stealing my food.’

3. Make national ownership real. Development partners should continue efforts to monitor and evaluate national ownership to ensure that it really happens. Current debates should increasingly focus on the role of political actors other than national governments, such as parliaments, local decision-making assemblies, and political parties in donor and partner countries. Such efforts could facilitate *democratic* ownership, as called for in the Busan Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation.

4. Do more to inform major political parties about their aid programmes and to find ways to involve the opposition in aid deliberations. Aid providers could encourage parliamentary debates on large-scale aid programmes and improve political parties’ research capacity. This could include working with the media to analyse aid programmes and inform the general public. Aid programmes could also be better aligned with election cycles in development processes; a case in point is the advantage of providing support to elections throughout the whole electoral cycle rather than through a single year agreement only.

5. Consider that however neutral aid appears to be, it will have a political impact in the partner country.

Therefore, solid political analyses of the complex interactions of the social, economic and political processes in a given context are needed. Such analyses require identifying the underlying drivers that explain how things work in practice and why chronic problems persist.

6. Nurture local knowledge production and opinion building, for example by supporting free and independent academic research and think tanks (both independent and linked to political parties). Encourage a financially sustainable, professional media that can serve as a watchdog that holds the government and others to account; a gatekeeper that provides a platform for public debate; and an agenda setter that draws attention to key issues of public concern.

7. Development aid is not, nor should it be, a primary driver of political change in certain countries. At best, it may provide catalytic support. Financial sustainability, however, is an urgent issue for a great number of partner organizations, particularly in civil society; when donor funding is threatened or blocked by an authoritarian regime, recipient organizations risk having to close down.

8. There is a need to critically analyse what it would take for donors and creditors to change. Consider which organizational and individual incentives prevent, undermine or promote internal reforms such as daring to use more open-ended, flexible and iterative processes, which tend to fit better with local realities than front-loaded and rigid time-bound project designs.

At a much more general and complex level, more efforts are needed to prevent the efforts of donor agencies to support democratization and development being undermined by the effects of other policies carried out by donor governments, such as agricultural subsidies, land grabbing, protection of business interests, capital flight or securitization of international relations. The International Food Policy Research Institute estimated in 2003 that the impact of subsidies costs developing countries USD 24 billion in lost income.² According to the Norwegian Ministry for Foreign Affairs,³ ‘developing countries lost around ten times their revenue from aid through illicit financial flows’, of which 3–5 per cent is derived from corruption, 30–35 per cent from criminal activities and 65 per cent from commercial activities.

Globally, a new emphasis should be placed on the *quality* of democracy, which goes beyond formal institutions and processes. Particularly urgent quality issues include the extent of the political inclusivity of men, women, boys and girls living in poverty—particularly their ability to voice concerns, and organize and influence development priorities such as improving education, health and job opportunities.

There is much to suggest that inclusive democratic politics can be more resilient and sustainable in meeting the growing demands of citizens. That is why democratic political processes (and the actors that drive those processes) should be at the heart of the global development agenda.



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² Xinshen Diao, Eugenio Diaz-Bonilla, and Sherman Robinson, *How Much Does it Hurt? The Impact of Agricultural Policies on Developing Countries* (Washington, D.C.: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2003), available at <http://bit.ly/1a5MgvL>.

³ Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Norway, *Illicit Financial Flows*, September 2012, available at <http://bit.ly/1nugbkV>.