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Institutions and Beyond:

Making Democracy Sustainable

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Today, more people than ever before are governed by elected representatives. Democracy – the idea that people have the right to control their government and that a government is legitimate only if and when it is controlled by the people – has acquired an almost unique global hegemony, hardly matched by any other worldview in modern history. It transcends cultures, religions and languages; it takes multiple forms and survives in the most inhospitable environments. Democracy is an expression of the very basic human quest for freedom and dignity and of the understanding that these values need to be shared.

The uneven propensity to share, and the need to define rules by which one's freedom is limited by the freedom of all others, is what makes democracy-building so complex and time-consuming. Yet, the need and the willingness to share freedom are also what make the process of democracy-building possible.

Defining the rules for sharing freedom - and building the institutions and mechanisms to ensure their application - is very much what human history has been about during the last couple of centuries. It has been a long-term endeavour because democracy is not the "natural", "by default" state of society when a dictatorship is overthrown. Authoritarian regimes

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do not nurture the idea of sharing. It needs to be learned and assimilated, to become the dominant pattern of communication between citizens. And it needs a sophisticated and always delicate institutional framework.

Time is running faster today and the world has become smaller. We have reasons to hope that what used to take centuries in the past may be done in a decade or two today. But let us be realistic. Democracies in the post-Soviet world are still being built with uneven success. Two decades after the end of militarized authoritarian regimes, some Latin American countries are again experiencing crises of governance and temptations of populism. Africa is moving forward but the terrain is still mined, both in the literal and in the metaphoric sense.

And there are also challenges facing democracy where it is held to be long established.

- The committee established to review the Swedish constitution and form of government has been mandated to look at "strengthening and deepening the Swedish democracy, increase citizens' trust in the functioning of democracy and increase voter turnout at elections".

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- In Norway, which is proud of the second-oldest living written constitution in the world, there is an emerging debate on whether or not to reform it in order to modernize the political system.
- In several countries, the issue of political participation, voting and citizenship status of immigrants is a huge and growing challenge for the sustainability of democracy. Look at the present "Latino debate" in the US, the Turkish community in Germany, North Africans in France, Russians in the "near abroad", and the emotions presently at play in the Netherlands.

I have stated these examples to underpin my assumption that the sustainability of democracy depends on more than institutions. It depends on the process - and one might indeed add culture - of interplay between institutions, and not least on the process of bridging the gap between popular expectations and delivery of tangible results.

There is a constant and universal tension between how political leaders fulfil their responsibility for effective service delivery by government, their responsibility for democratic governance, and their responsibility for the protection of the human rights of each citizen. They may indeed not seek to deliver on any of these.

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The task of supporters and promoters of democracy is therefore to help to create not only the frameworks, but the incentives and the culture, for political leaders and participants to fulfil these obligations. Institutional reforms may change the power relations between actors, be it among existing political forces or between state, civil society and citizens, in a fundamental manner. For example, the choice of electoral system has important consequences, which need to be more widely understood. In recent years, electoral system choices and changes have had major effects on the practical framework of power from Lesotho to Fiji to Palestine – and indeed to Italy.

Democratic political change does not happen by dropping supposedly independent technical institutional solutions from outside, be they in the form of constitutions, elections, or political party systems. Sustained democratic politics results from changes in the space and the climate for debate that can give local flavour and meaning to institutions, even if they are substantially inspired by experiences from abroad.

This leads me to my first proposition: **Democracy is a difficult process**. Designing and building the framework and practice of democracy is a complex, interlinked process. Some parts are better known than others.

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Any institutional framework such as a constitution, or an electoral system, is itself complex, and tailored to the constraints of the political and power dynamics in which it is formed and the negotiating skills of the parties involved.

Democratic institutions and processes are expected to increase transparency, to empower vulnerable groups and create incentives to protect the rights of the poor and marginalised, and to create mechanisms to mediate conflict. However, already powerful elites can often use their advantages even more freely. Playing the cards of ethnic and religious fears is all too common in democratic politics.

Sustainable democracy is not accomplished by fulfilling a check list of items or delivering on a series of events – such as creating many political parties and holding elections. Democracy is more than just elections. Elections are necessary but not sufficient for democracy. They need to be based on a system that is inclusive, which does not merely result in predestined winners and losers. Ultimately, it is only by gaining the trust of its citizens that a country can attain democratic legitimacy. Nor do sustained democratic politics happen for free. Here is a message to

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international donors, who tend to spend big amounts on event-driven electoral observation and too little on supporting national capacities for managing the cycle of elections. Especially in a post-conflict setting, it is important to get not only the first elections right, but the second and third. A continuing cycle of elections is needed to gain people's trust. In the long term, it is national actors who must ensure that electoral processes are free and fair, open and transparent, providing a level playing field, and that results are broadly accepted. And it is on national human and financial resources that such processes need to be based if they are to be sustainable.

The magnitude of the challenge is illustrated by those countries which still fall short of becoming established democracies in spite of holding a series of multiparty elections. When the opposition is allowed out of a box for a short period before each election and the ruling group monopolises the airwaves, there is little if any democracy. Nor are established democracies immune from institutional design failures or inadequacies in ensuring functional political compromises or responsiveness to new realities. As democracy is a process and not an

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event, countries must constantly work to sustain and improve it even where it may appear to have been consolidated.

This challenge applies not least to political parties. With the exception of microstates, democratic politics cannot be organised without participants coming together in political parties. Yet polls almost everywhere indicate a low, and often decreasing, level of trust in political parties. The development of strong and credible political parties that can articulate and represent social interests and needs, transform them into political programs and implement them effectively, is a high priority on the democracy agenda. Today, political parties are arguably democracy's weakest link. As political parties are supposed to bridge popular expectations and the institutions of governance, the crisis of confidence in political parties should set the alarm bells ringing for anyone concerned with the sustainability of democracy.

My second proposition is: **Democracy is a long-term process that cannot be achieved by quick-fix interventions**. Recent attempts at democratic engineering in Afghanistan and Iraq clearly and painfully

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demonstrate this fact. Sustainable democracy requires a long-term commitment to democracy stretching over generations.

For democracy to be vital, the young need to believe in it. In developed countries, people are likely to remain voters if they have turned up before the age of about 30 – and not to become voters if they have not. Most of those who are involved in other forms of political activity also participate in elections. Much the same may be true in developing countries, in which poor participation of youth may have far-reaching consequences, given the high proportion of young people. Moves to encourage political involvement may not show clear results for ten years – and their effects will then last forty or more years, whether they were successful or not.

My third proposition is: **Democracy is inherently local.** It must be home-grown, and its delivery should depend on the commitment of domestic actors. While recognising the universal validity of the broad principles underpinning democracy, it will inevitably take different institutional forms in different regions, countries and localities to resonate with local conditions.

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Today democracy is under pressure and efforts to promote democracy are contested. The scepticism ranges from questioning the role and effectiveness of external assistance in general, via accusations of Western double standards, to outright campaigns against democracy promotion. There is also a growing sense that the Western-style paradigm for development and democracy does not work well for divided societies.

I dare say that some of this scepticism is not ill-founded. And this prompts a need to find effective ways of addressing democracy's pressing challenges by stimulating action by national actors rather than imposing solutions from the outside.

In this context, I take the liberty of promoting an IDEA product: the State of Democracy Assessment. While instruments exist that rank democracies based on indicators and measured from the outside, our methodology is designed to be conducted by citizens themselves. In both developed and developing democracies, the assessments have found that building formal institutions such as constitutions and the conduct of regular elections are easier than, for example, securing effective inclusion of minorities, providing equal access to justice or minimizing corruption in public life. Assessments based on the State of Democracy framework have strengthened local research and analytical capacity, generated locally led

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debate and awareness about the state of their democracy, and contributed to advocacy for policy reform.

My fourth proposition is: **Democracy is a fundamentally political process.** It is the product of debate and dialogue of stakeholders, and is not amenable to purely technical solutions. Democracy is about politics, and about the distribution and management of power. While it is both an art (that of managing political relationships) and a science (where political science approaches are used to engineer and design institutions) it is all about politics. That makes it dynamic, interactive and unpredictable. It is also why, even though democracy as a form of government provides the best conditions for stability, the process of democratisation can be destabilising. This should be taken seriously but not used as an excuse for avoiding necessary but perhaps painful measures to advance democratisation.

Democracy has stakeholders and actors at local, national, regional and international levels. Some may be in for the long-haul, inclusive and visionary in their approach, at least some of the time. Others may be short-term, sectional, venal or not even committed to democracy. But they cannot be wished away. Imposed frameworks are likely to be dismantled by local political forces later, either by amendment or by force. Angola's experience in 1992, with a winner take all institutional

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framework leading to the resumption of armed conflict by the loser, is as good an example as any. Contrast this with the results of South Africa's broadly negotiated institutional settlement of 1994.

My fifth proposition is: **While democracy cannot be exported, or imported as a package, it can certainly be supported.** Ten years ago there was still much optimism about promoting democracy, not least based on early lessons from Central and Eastern Europe. While there are certainly lessons to be learnt from these transitions, we may have fooled ourselves into believing that the democratisation process in these countries can be easily replicated elsewhere. But these countries were fundamentally parts of European institutional traditions and culture, with high levels of education and technology which turned out to be enablers of economic growth. These countries also had the tremendously important political magnet of the European Union and NATO partnership and membership. And substantial financial resources were made available by the West.

Today, there is a different environment. One challenge is to make democracy work in the context of globalisation. The autonomy of sovereign states is blurred and capacity to implement national agendas in the political, economic and social sphere is constrained. Another challenge is to respond to the post 9/11 world, where democracy

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promotion as a US foreign policy objective has led to tensions and anxieties among sovereign states that they may be candidates for selective "democratization putsches". This may create resistance which will delay authentic, nationally driven democratization efforts.

Comparative international experiences can help home-grown learning processes - but democracy building must involve local actors at every stage - from the design of institutions and processes to the implementation of policies.

To take an example: IDEA has been actively engaged with political parties and civil society in Nepal to create platforms for informed and interactive political dialogues. Nepali political stakeholders have expressed interest in learning about the political transitions in Bolivia and South Africa, how a political settlement and basic political consensus around democratic constitutional principles were developed, and how agreement was reached on a process for drafting a constitution through a Constituent Assembly that was bound by these democratic principles. In our activities in Bolivia, we see the same interest in the South African experience.

The developments in Nepal earlier this year underpin my final proposition: **Democracy is a value and an end in itself.** Nepal is just a

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recent example of citizens showing, by brave demonstrations and slogans, that they consider democracy as a value and end in itself. Putting their lives on the line, they defied the view of some that demand for democracy to been driven by international NGOs. Ordinary, impoverished people, without recourse to political theory, endured food shortages, harassment and violence at the hands of the security forces and demonstrated in no uncertain terms that democracy was an end in itself to them.

The struggle in the streets of Kathmandu reflects the recognition of democracy as a fundamental principle - enshrined in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* It might then still be that in the practice of democracy "all politics are local" - but our local livelihood is no longer in any way cut of from global events. That insight is both highly challenging and very promising.

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