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7 June 2006

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 position, hardly matched by any other worldview in modern history. 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.

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. Why, such a long time? Well, democracy is not the "natural", "by default" state of society when a dictatorship is overthrown. Authoritarian regimes 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.

Such optimism about promoting democracy was given a boost not least by 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 they there were substantial financial resources made available by the West.

So even in this age of rapid change, 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 again experience 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.

Taking a hard look, we know 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 Swedish democracy, increase citizens' trust in the functioning of democracy and increase voter turnout at elections"
- In Norway, which is proud of the second-oldest living constitution in the world, there is an emerging debate about the need to reform it in order to revitalize the political system
- In several countries, the issue of participation, voting and citizenship status of immigrants is a huge and growing challenge for the sustainability of democracy. Look at the "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. Indeed, Denmark is not stranger to such discussions.

Democracy also holds today a central place in debate and conduct of foreign policy of many countries.

Challenges to democracy – and to democracy-building

Key Challenges Facing Democracy

<u>Conflict</u>: There is widespread agreement that democracy is the best tool for the peaceful management of social and political conflicts and hence lays the most solid foundation for political and economic development. Yet, since democratization involves profound

changes in the distribution of power and in the relationship between citizens and the state, democracy often generates violence before it becomes able to manage conflict. For societies coming out of conflict, priority to immediate imperatives like rebuilding state institutions and strengthening security and financial systems can put at risk the need for developing democratic practices serving long term stability.

Development failures: In some parts of the world there is evidence of declining support for democracy, due to the perception that democracy has failed to improve peoples' lives. Democratic institutions such as legislatures, executive branches and political parties are seen as ineffective in representing the citizenry's demand for economic and social progress. Even in countries or regions where democracy was believed to have deep roots, popular discontent with the lack of economic and social development can lead to the emergence of populist and extremist politics.

Persistent authoritarianism: Failures of democracies to establish stability and development are at times used as a pretext by authoritarian or fundamentalist regimes to consolidate their hold of power and undemocratic practices. In the context of global efforts to fight terrorism, national security needs are claimed to legitimize infringements on citizens' basic freedoms and to resist political pluralism and the rise of potential opposition.

Globalization: Public trust in democracy is also challenged by the fact that external factors are ever-more dominant in the political life of any nation. Global economic trends, world market prices, foreign direct investment, multilateral or bilateral trade frameworks, loans from international financial institutions, and donor aid all impact domestic policy and the freedom of manoeuvre for elected authorities. The increasing number of international actors in development and democratization processes adds to the perception that such processes are initiated and led from the outside.

The impact of globalization on domestic politics also poses challenges to democratic life in countries with a high level of economic development. 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.

<u>Short-term nature of politics and popular expectations</u>: The sustainability of democracy depends on effective policy-making processes and a democratic conduct of politics. On many policy issues the time horizon of the policy-making cycle, from agenda-setting to policy deliberation, enactment and implementation, does not often coincide with electoral cycles. In the age of globalization and with increasingly complex societies, major challenges can only be addressed by long-term efforts transcending normal electoral cycles: an evident example is environmental problems. The ability of democratic politics to deliver on public expectations is increasingly questioned, and at the same time popular expectations are difficult to meet within the timeframe of one electoral period. The competitive nature of democratic politics can at times contribute to unrealistically raising public expectations for immediate and short-term impact of new policies. The frustration with governments perceived as not delivering may lead to discontent-driven and frequent changes of government, resulting in a self-reinforcing loss of public confidence in democracy. This dilemma gives reason for concern, not least coupled with the patterns of declining political and electoral participation with younger generations in older democracies less engaged with democratic institutions than their parents were.

<u>Exclusion</u>: Genuine democracy can only be sustained through inclusive processes. The lack of appropriate frameworks that lead to the inclusion of minorities is a challenge that democracy faces, not least in fragmented societies. Exclusion of women, youth, as well as ethnic and religious minorities, from public life increasingly alienates large segments of societies against democratization processes that are seen as a new way of perpetuating the rule of dominant groups.

<u>Women's participation</u>: A continuing challenge is the political participation of women. Decades after the introduction of equal suffrage for men and women, equal participation in political activities and as elected representatives is still not a reality.

Challenges to Democracy-Building: Complexity and Resistance

Democracy may be a basic human ambition, but it is complex as a human process.

Inadequate approaches: It is increasingly recognized that Western-style governance paradigms do not always work well in societies with other traditions of political identification. Donors are seen as having been too focused on the building of executive branch institutions and too little on involvement of poor and marginalized people still ruled by patron-client relationships. Democracy-building is a long-term, non-linear, multifaceted and intensely political process, and technocratic approaches not taking account of this can produce autocracy with appearances of good governance.

Effectiveness and legitimacy is questioned: There is tension between the perceived "giving and receiving" ends of development and democracy assistance, and frustration that many international efforts are short term, event driven and fragmented in nature, leading to incoherence and ineffectiveness. As a category of aid, democracy assistance is lacking even basic information-sharing tools or agreement on basic principles of action, something which makes coordination between actors weak and creates confusion even at country level. There are calls for a critical examination of the assumptions and motives of donors. In line with this, the role, effectiveness and legitimacy of external democracy actors are questioned. On the other hand, there is disappointment among donors that massive support for national and local civil society based organizations has contributed only in a limited manner to democratic, political reform or improved access to or functioning of representative institutions.

Democracy-Building Meets with Resistance
Democracy-building is not only more complex but also more contested today. While the promotion of democracy is more central in foreign policy debate and conduct than before, it is also true that democracy-building is increasingly viewed by many with suspicion. There is increasing polarization over ideas and activities in the field of democracy assistance and democracy-building. Democracy 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. Undemocratic regimes are exploiting this situation.

<u>Accusations</u>: There are accusations levelled against democracy-building efforts for being a façade behind which other foreign policy agendas are hidden. Often linked to this are allegations of double standards on the part of key actors in democracy promotion.

<u>Resistance</u>: Some states are disregarding calls for democratic practices, or are openly supporting campaigns against democracy support, declaring it offensive to their own sovereignty. When such approaches are taken by states that carry global significance, it severely impacts the conditions for democracy-building worldwide.

Some learning to be applied for the next generation of democracy-building

Firstly: Democracy is a difficult process.
Designing and building the framework and practice of democracy is a complex, interlinked process.

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.

Institutional reforms may change the power relations between actors, be it among existing political forces or between state, civil society and citizens in a more fundamental manner. For example, the choice of electoral systems has important consequences, which we should better understood. Palestine is a topical example, where overrepresentation of the largest party was supposed to bring stable government.

Democratic political change does not happen by dropping outsiders' technical institutional solutions, be that in the form of constitutions, elections, or political party systems. Sustained democratic politics result from changes in the climate and spaces for debate that can give local flavour and meaning to institutions, even if largely copied from abroad.

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 create mechanisms to mediate conflict. However, already powerful elites can often use their advantages even more freely, and playing cards of ethnic and religious fears are too common in democratic politics.

A vital 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. A continous cycle of elections is needed to gain people's and trust and legitimacy. Nor do sustained democratic politics happen for free.

Here is a message to 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. Specially in a post-conflict setting, it is important to get not only the first elections right, but the second and third. If national actors cannot ensure that electoral processes are free and fair, open and transparent, and result broadly accepted, the process is a failure.

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 inadequate institutions in ensuring functional political compromises or responsiveness to new realities. As democracy is a process and not an event, countries must constantly work to improve it even where it may appear to have consolidated.

This challenge applies very much to <u>political parties</u>. 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. Political parties are arguably today democracy's weakest link, including in this part of the world. As the political parties are the supposed bridge popular expectations and

governance, the crisis of confidence in political parties should set the alarm bells ringing for anyone concerned with the vitality of democracy.

Secondly: 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 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. Most who are otherwise politically 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 – but may then last forty or more years, whether successful or not.

Thirdly: Democracy is inherently local.

It must be home-grown, and its delivery should be attributed well-known actors. It will inevitably take different institutional forms in different regions, countries and localities to resonate with local conditions and actors. This is possible and to be supported, even while recognising the universal validity of the broad principles underpinning democracy.

There is 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.

Fourthly: 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 (art 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. We see that in the linkages between democracy, development, and conflict.

<u>Democracy and development</u>: Democratization and socio-economic development are deeply interrelated. In many countries, not least in Latin America, the capacity of institutions to deliver and to be seen as delivering on development appears to be a key factor for confidence in democracy. At the same time, the effectiveness of democratic institutions and the soundness of democratic politics are acknowledged as catalysts for development. Democracy creates the enabling environment in which policy choices are subject to the control of free and responsible citizens, capable of holding governments and state institutions accountable for their implementation. Democracy therefore is seen as a tool to empower people to address issues of poverty and exclusion.

This relationship is acknowledged by the international community. Yet, in parallel, the opposite perception that authoritarian regimes have an advantage in promoting development still survives, superficially assessing the case of China and in spite of a number of dictatorship-induced economic disasters.

Likewise, in many countries, influential actors of political life that embrace formal democratic procedures, still fail to grasp the vulnerability of democracy to extreme poverty, inequality and social exclusion. There is a need for political actors to better understand the likely developmental effects of their political choices and the likely political effects of their developmental choices.

<u>Democracy and conflict</u>: Internationally supported democracy-building is often an inseparable part of broader peace-building processes. In such situations, the design of institutions and processes of democracy needs to adopt a conflict management perspective. This typically involves an appropriate sequencing of constitution-building, elections and informal dialogue processes which can mitigate the conflict-inducing potential of elections. It also involves making appropriate choices with regard to the electoral system and constitutional provisions so as to favour inclusiveness and participation and to allow all key actors to be represented in the new institutional frameworks.

Fifthly: While democracy cannot be exported, or imported as a package, it can certainly be supported.

Comparative international experiences can help homegrown learning processes.

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 to 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 recent developments in Nepal underpin my final proposition: **Democracy is a value and an end in itself.** Nepal is just the most 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 has 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 and reflects on the recognition granted to democracy as a fundamental principle – enshrined in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights.* As citizens of the world, our mandate and our responsibility is to work for making democracy a reality for all people.

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.