



**Launch of the  
Handbook on Democratic Dialogue**

**CIDA, IDEA, OAS, UNDP**

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This event marks the successful conclusion of a ground breaking project. Three international organisations, UNDP, OAS and IDEA, and one national development assistance agency, Canadian CIDA, have joined forces to produce an innovative and much needed tool – a Handbook for practitioners on Democratic Dialogue.

Let me first thank the co-authors of the Handbook Bettye Pruitt and Philip Thomas, for their perseverance in this project: the finished product more than justifies the enormous time and effort that they have contributed. We also extend thanks to Lakhdar Brahimi, Former Advisor to the UN Secretary General, for his enlightened foreword; the supporting authors Elena Diaz-Pinto, Katrin Käufer and Martin Ängeby; John Lobsinger and Canadian CIDA, for the generous financial contribution that helped bring this Handbook to the light of the day, and our colleagues from the OAS, UNDP and IDEA, - Marc-André Franche, Céline Moyroud, Betilde Muñoz Pogossian, Yadira Soto and Goran Fejic who, as members of the project Steering Committee, provided support and guidance to the authors' group. You will find many other names in the Acknowledgements section of the Handbook and their place there is indeed well deserved.

This Democratic Dialogue Handbook is innovative in many respects:

- It sheds a new light on the overwhelming need for dialogue in our globalised world;
- It conceptualises dialogue as a complex, multi-faceted process and unveils its broad and multiple fields of application: in the building of democratic governance, in development assistance, in conflict resolution.

- It encapsulates the rich and varied experience of the sponsoring organisations in the facilitation of dialogue processes across the world;
- Finally it offers practical, non-prescriptive options to practitioners and facilitators of dialogue on how to plan, organise, convene, implement, monitor and evaluate a dialogue process so as to ensure its success and sustainability.

The objective of International IDEA's work is to strengthen democratic institutions and processes, supporting the building of inclusive and sustainable democracy worldwide. In this context, dialogue is both a key ingredient of democratic governance and an indispensable tool for the achievement and strengthening of democratic institutions and democratic practice.

Dialogue has a key role in IDEA's strategy, a role that stems naturally from the way we conceive democracy-building itself.

Democracy-building is much more than the technical design of effective governance institutions. It is a long-term, non-linear, multi-faceted and intensely political process. A democracy-building process that aspires to be legitimate and sustainable needs to engage citizens in a political process fully perceived as driven by genuine local needs and priorities. A political process almost by definition involves dialogue as its most indispensable and most critical ingredient, indeed as its main tool.

Engaging local actors in a genuine dialogue about the state of their democracy, about its inclusiveness, about its capacity to represent them, about its effectiveness in translating their aspirations into government policies and service delivery is the point of departure of IDEA's initiatives and projects. It is also at the heart of IDEA's State of Democracy Assessment methodology, unique methodology for citizen-led assessments of the state of democracy in a particular country or local entity.

The Handbook is a powerful new knowledge resource and tool for practitioners and facilitators worldwide. The ideas within it have been roadtested and validated in processes of democratic reform. A dialogue among political party and civil society leaders in Nepal, facilitated and supported by IDEA, was a decisive transitional moment that allowed Nepali political and civil society leaders to express themselves on their country's regime, on the role of the Monarchy and on the kind of democracy they considered suitable for their country. This dialogue is one of the major case studies in the Handbook.

The Handbook also poses a policy challenge. Dialogue is a process of perceiving, of listening, of taking risks. It is not a process of judging, of reacting, of taking firm positions. Although windows of opportunity provide the occasion for breakthrough, dialogue is in its essence a long term process.

This has implications for democracy building support. Dialogue cannot be supported as an event driven process or as an exit strategy. It is not about lawyers and academics dropping inflatable institutions and identikit solutions. It is about understanding and about sustainable and locally driven processes.

We believe in dialogue and in the willingness and capacity of men and women to engage in genuine inquisitive conversation with other people in a positive, unprejudiced and problem-solving spirit. However, we know well from practice that many and diverse circumstances can hamper and prevent such “positive conversations”. A history of exclusion and oppression may have suppressed the minimum level of confidence which is necessary to start a dialogue. Protracted violence may have induced widespread fear and people may have become reluctant to ask questions in public and to express their opinions freely. Debilitating mass poverty, disease and natural disaster may have crushed the very energy of people to engage in any activity beyond the day-to-day struggle for physical survival. There are minimal conditions for dialogue, both material and political ones. There is also something we got used to call the “culture of dialogue” that may need to be revived, strengthened or rebuilt from scratch, particularly in post-conflict situations characterised by widespread psycho-social trauma.

Specific circumstances will always dictate specific approaches. Often in real life, the process we define as dialogue – the sort of “open, non-prejudiced conversations that matter” will come in a messy continuum in which we will hardly be able to distinguish “dialogue” from “debate” and from, real or show-case “negotiations” and “deliberations”. The moment of breakthrough may come suddenly, unannounced, and we may be able to identify it only after the event.

As a political process, dialogue is shaped by an intricate grid of constantly changing and hardly quantifiable parameters, “the human factor” being the least predictable and the most unstable of all. Ultimately, we need to acknowledge the wisdom of the highly

experienced “dialogue practitioner” who wrote the foreword to our Handbook, Lakhdar Brahimi: *“The best plan, carefully based on the best information available, will still have to pass the test of the reality on the ground”*.

The publication of the Handbook is not just the successful conclusion of a complex partnership – it is also a new beginning. From today, IDEA, UNDP, OAS and CIDA will all be using this new powerful tool – the Handbook on Democratic Dialogue. We now need to think together how to follow up this Handbook and make it most effective. We need to disseminate it widely. We may consider developing training modules and networks of facilitators. We may consider building dialogue practitioners’ networks which share experience and answer questions. And we must consider and act on the implications for democracy building support by donors.