

Managing Diversity: the Promise and Challenge of Democracy  
Vidar Helgesen Secretary General, International IDEA Managing Diversity: the Promise and Challenge of Democracy Oslo, 12th June 2007  
Excellencies, Ladies and Gentlemen, dear Guests,

At the very outset, let me thank Deputy Minister Johansen and the Royal Norwegian Government for their generous contribution to this event and for being such good hosts.

My introductory presentation is entitled: "Managing Diversity: The promise and Challenge of Democracy".

I am only half-happy with this title. Do we really want to "manage" diversity? Can diversity be managed? Wrongly, one might assume that our hidden intention is to "harness" diversity, to subdue it to a "raison d'Etat". If "managing" is the wrong term, as I was advised by some of my colleagues, which is the right one? "Coping" with diversity doesn't convey the message either. It gives the idea that diversity is a burden that, willy-nilly, we need to accept. On a more positive note, someone suggested "celebrating" diversity. I like that one better, but again, should a fact of life be "celebrated"?

As you will have noted: many questions. The fact that we have more questions than answers is the reason why we have organised this meeting.

What I am certain about is that diversity is with us to stay. International IDEA, as an intergovernmental organisation, has the mandate to support governments and other actors in the building of democracy. What governments do can be defined as "management". This is why I finally decided to leave the title as is.

How does human diversity affect our work in supporting democracy?

The diversity of the world directs us to look at diversity in representation, participation and impact, and to recognise that democracy, may be accessed and experienced differently, depending on where one is located in the spectrum of ethnicity, gender and class.

The diversity of the world informs and inspires our search for partners: in principle all voices ought to be heard (which, unfortunately is not the case in practice) in order to understand what kind of institutional design is the most appropriate in given circumstances; what will be the real impact of a particular electoral system, a specific constitutional choice or a political party legislation.

Democracy is not a technical but an eminently political concept. Technical tools are necessary to build it. Technical tools can be improved and shared. However, both the ways in which they are applied and the results they produce are political in their nature. They are political because they are essentially about the way in which people interact individually and collectively on issues of common interest. The constantly moving, visible surface of this interaction is history itself.

For practical purposes, we have adopted our own "working" definition that describes democracy as a system of governance in which government is controlled by the people and in which citizens are treated as equals in the exercise of that control. International IDEA has adopted a genuinely non-prescriptive and non-intrusive approach. Research and empirical evidence confirmed our understanding that democracy can only be built by those who need it and who will ultimately use it – the citizens themselves. Hence, we definitely don't want to lecture others about what democracy is and what it is not. We don't take ourselves to be the sole depositaries of knowledge about democracy. We don't even insist on the need for a "universal" definition of democracy since we are well aware that the idea of universalism too can be abused to advance other, partial and less admissible agendas.

What are the challenges that governments and other political actors face with regard to diversity?  
What are the promises of democracy?

Since the Westphalia Peace Treaties and the emergence of the nation-state, both democratic breakthroughs and democratic setbacks have taken place essentially in the framework of the nation-state. Today, it is in the framework of the state that we vote and exercise our civic rights.

Thus, at least in Europe and in the West, we have come to see national identity as the dominant form of identity, or at least, as the framework in which other identities evolve and interact in the political process. On the other hand, what constitutes the nation is not always clear. The “nation” is usually associated with rather vague and abstract concepts drawing on people’s perceptions, such as “common destiny” or “sense of belonging”.

Looking back, we may note that the idea of the nation state has always been challenged. It was challenged before it acquired its 20th Century hegemony by the remains of feudal entities, by the Church, by the myriad local traditions and customs. It was challenged during the colonial expansion by those who saw their own nationhood denied and suffocated. It is challenged today by the emergence of the global economy and global issues such as climate change or HIV-AIDS that can no longer be tackled effectively at the level of any single state.

Very few states today are ethnically homogeneous nation states. The geography of languages, myths, religions and customary law rarely ever coincided with state borders. Yet, the nation-state paradigm kept producing the idea that cultural homogeneity was good and desirable and that diversity was a curse: something that had to be endured and tolerated rather than acknowledged, respected and approved. This is not accidental. Obviously, the exercise of power is easier and the tools to be used are simpler, if the population is homogeneous, if the “sense of belonging” is strong and unchallenged. This is well understood by authoritarian rulers who have always tried to boost patriotic feelings and “the sense of belonging” whenever they felt their rule was challenged. We also know too well, that forcible attempts to induce ethnic and national homogeneity where it does not exist, attempts to make state and cultural borders fit perfectly into each other, are responsible for some of the major disasters in recent history, from Rwanda to the former Yugoslavia, from Chechnya to Darfur. Conversely, there are example, such as Somalia, of countries characterized by homogeneity in language, religion, social traditions and institutions, whose recent history blatantly contradicts the theory of cultural homogeneity as conducive to building nation-states.

The disjunction between state borders one hand, and cultural/linguistic/ religious borders on the other, has always existed. Yet, we look at this disjunction in a different way today: first, because we are more aware of the political uses and abuses of diversity; second, because some core values of democracy are definitely exercising today an unprecedented “magnetism”.

Has the diversity of the world increased or is it just about our perceptions? Both, I think.

The turbulent post-colonial developments in Africa, have revealed the continent’s diversity as the arbitrary nature of colonial borders became evident

A similar thing happened after the disintegration of the Soviet empire following the end of the Cold War

We are definitely more often in contact with “the other”: through increased trade and financial flows, increased migrations, an increased modelling role of Western life-styles and, at the same time, increased resistance to this modelling.

Globalisation with all its facets is a continuous competition and clash between diversity and uniformity. At the level of nations and states, globalisation and partitioning seem to be just two sides of the same historical process: the world is becoming a single financial market, but the number of states (members of the UN) has increased from 51 in 1945 to 192 in 2006.

Finally, all these trends seem to have resulted in a general move from ideological to identity-based collective claims at the level of the nation-state and of the world as a whole.

At the same time, democracy, regardless of the absence of a single model, has become almost a synonym for inclusiveness. A democratic society is basically seen as an inclusive society. The equation today is about balancing the infinite diversity of the real world with the imperative of inclusiveness and with the need for a functional and effective government able to deliver on citizens' expectations.

Can nation-states, through the constant improvement of their democratic practice evolve to become truly multi-cultural?

On the one hand, the acknowledgement of diversity has become another name for democracy; on the other, a level of unity remains the condition of a workable, organised and democratic society. Common goals need to be set. Dialogue needs to take place across identity-based divides. Individuals should be able to act as citizens, not only as members of their respective communities.

What are the shared values and ideals to which citizens should be committed to make the multicultural and democratic nation-state possible?

Democracy cannot but acknowledge and recognise collective identities as they emerge and evolve. Yet, nation-building today seems to be in need of other values beyond those based on ethnicity - precisely at a time when the latter have come to the forefront of the stage. How to overcome this paradox?

These issues are far from being purely theoretical. They have obvious implications for the work of all national and international actors involved in supporting democracy.

We, believe and we work with the hypothesis that democracy is the only framework that allows diversity to prosper and to be seen, accepted and nurtured as, a precious catalyst of cultural enrichment, economic growth and peace.

However, when we look at the ways in which diversity has been addressed by different governments and political actors – all of them inspired by democratic principles, what we notice is a whole range of different legal and institutional options and practices.

Different approaches and choices have influenced different electoral systems throughout the world, different laws regulating the functioning of political parties, different civil legislations and different ways of ensuring a higher level of participation of traditionally under-represented and marginalised groups, women being, of course, the largest and more conspicuous of such groups.

Different schools of thought and practical approaches have also shaped immigration and integration policies – from those tending to integrate immigrants with the emphasis on equality and adherence to the same “republican values” (France being the obvious example), to those acknowledging the collective claims of different communities within the nation (the Anglo-Saxon model).

What makes democracy more inclusive: integration or the acknowledgement and respect of diversity? An institutional design that promotes equality or one that mirrors diversity? Answers are not easy to provide as both systems, when implemented rigidly, seem to have produced political tensions and sometimes violent reactions both among the immigrant population and the citizens of the receiving community.

Diversity is often perceived as threatening not only national cultural homogeneity, but also the achieved levels of social coexistence and harmony.

On the other hand, the pursuance of cultural assimilation is perceived as threatening those who are already vulnerable and feel unsafe in a society that functions with different norms and rules.

Minorities should be protected. But is the sheltering of minorities in identity-based cultural cocoons a real protection? Is such protection not likely to render a bad service to these minorities precisely by condemning them forever to a minority status? Already marginalised, they may well miss the opportunity to acquire the linguistic and other skills they need in order to level the playing field, to be enabled to participate in politics and compete on an equal footing. And what about the paradoxes entailed by the protection of “minorities” in situations in which past actions of those very minorities have been perceived by “the majority” – or actually have been – the main reason for violent political conflicts, as in the case of Kosovo?

Can European – and more generally, Western societies, benefit, in addressing these issues – from the experiences of the global South? Some societies of the global South, like India or South Africa, have lived with diversity since time immemorial, have experienced the best and the worst of it, and are probably less constrained by the nation-state paradigm. Can we learn from each other?

IDEA, in cooperation and with the support of the Royal Norwegian Government, has convened this roundtable with a double aspiration and hope:

- First, we wish to encourage a meaningful debate on an increasingly relevant theme whose implications for the design of democratic institutions and the quality of democratic practice are obvious;
- Second, we also wish to learn and benefit in more practical terms from the debate in order to fine-tune IDEA’s strategy and its programme of work so as to make our knowledge tools and our support to democratic reforms even more useful and more effective.

We hope that today’s debate will allow us to distil a set of key best practices that may be useful in a variety of different contexts.

We have the honour and the great privilege to have with us today a group of eminent guests – academics, social researchers, political practitioners and opinion leaders. They come from different parts of the world and have different professional backgrounds. They have in common the fact that they have all thought, debated and written in different contexts and in different ways on this democracy/diversity nexus.

The Roundtable, as indicated in the Agenda, will consist of two consecutive panels:

The first one is entitled “Whose democracy? Diversity in a globalised world”.

The title of the second one is “Democracy and Diversity: Experiences from around the globe”

I will leave it to our moderator to introduce the participants in the two panels, but let me introduce our moderator:

Shashi Tharoor is Chairman of Dubai-based Afras Ventures and former Under-Secretary-General of the United Nations. He joined the staff of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1978 and had various responsibilities until he left UN in 2007. He worked as a peace-keeper in South East Asia and former Yugoslavia, and as senior adviser to the Secretary-General. Mr. Tharoor is the author of several books, as well as numerous articles and book reviews in a wide range of publications including the New York Times, the International Herald Tribune, Time, and Newsweek.

Following each panel debate, there will be some time reserved for questions from the floor. I am confident that we will all benefit from and feel enriched by this exceptional event.

Thank you very much for your attention.