

DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE

Celebrating the 10-year anniversary of the Oslo Center, with democracy assistance as its core activity, it is appropriate to give a short overview of what democracy assistance implies for the Oslo Center. This short article neither aims nor claims to address all aspects of democracy today or for the future. Nor does it aim to outline all of the challenges and opportunities of democracy assistance and what democracy assistance means. The aim of this article is rather to give a brief overview of the history of democracy assistance and the international context in which the Oslo Center operates. The article will start with an overview of how many describe democracy, as well as its principles and its importance. It will further describe democracy assistance and who the providers and beneficiaries of such assistance are. The article ends with some reflections on the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead in building democracy in a turbulent world.

What do we mean by democracy?

Democracy is defined by many as the majority rule. At the same time, it has also been recognized that the majority rule should be balanced with respect for and accommodation of the rights of the minority (minorities). In addition a democracy is often characterized by the power of the people through the election of leaders and an organization or a situation in which everyone is treated equally and has equal rights¹.

The organization and structure of a democratic system will vary from country to country. The local context, the social fabric and the culture and history of a country will influence how the democratic system is implemented in practice. Some countries would have the people more directly involved in decision-making processes, i.e. more use of referendums, while others would mainly involve the people indirectly through elected representatives, increased participation in public consultations and an interest in involving minorities and women in these processes.

However, in a democracy there are certain basic principles that are recognized as fundamental. The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Covenant on Civil and Political Rights are the main instruments. Article 22 in the Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone has the right to take part in the government of his country, either directly or through freely chosen representatives². The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights³ further describes several rights that are key for a democratic system. The main point is the link between human rights and democracy. *Article 21 (3) in the International Human Rights Declaration explains the relationship:*

"The will of the people shall be the basis of the authority of government; this shall be expressed in periodic and genuine elections which shall be by universal and equal suffrage and shall be held by secret vote or by equivalent free voting procedures."

The international focus on the role of women in peace and security⁴ and women's rights and the need to protect and secure the rights and interests of minorities has become key in the work on human rights⁵.

¹ Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary

² United Nations – The Universal Declaration of Human Rights

³ The United Nations – International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights

⁴ UN Security Council Resolution 1325 is one example.

⁵ UN Declaration on the Rights of Persons Belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities is one example of more focus on minorities issues internationally <http://www.un-documents.net/a47r135.htm>

Observing the link between democracy and the human rights framework, a democratic system is further built on some key principles. These principles are normally the basis of a democratic system and are not dependent on how the system is structured, which is often influenced by the local context, history and social fabric. The following principles are often recognized as the main principles for a democratic system⁶:

1. One of the most basic signposts of a democracy is citizen participation in government. **Citizen participation** may take many forms including standing for election, voting in elections, being informed by the government, debating issues, attending community or civic meetings, being members of private voluntary organizations, paying taxes, and even protesting.
2. Democratic societies emphasize the principle that all **people are equal**. Equality means that all individuals are valued equally, have equal opportunities and equal rights and are not discriminated against.
3. Democratic societies are **politically tolerant**. This means that while the majority of the people rule in a democracy, the rights of the minority must be protected. The people who are not in power must be allowed to organize and speak out. One goal of democracy is to make the best possible decision for the society. To achieve this, respect for all people and their points of view is needed. Decisions are more likely to be accepted, even by those who oppose them, if all citizens have been allowed to discuss, debate and question them.
4. In a democracy no-one is above the law and there is a strong sense of **rule of law**. This means that everyone must obey the law and be held accountable if they violate it. Democracy also insists that "due process of law" is applied i.e. the law is equally, fairly and consistently enforced.
5. Many "newer" democratic countries also choose to have a **bill of rights** to protect people against abuse of power. A bill of rights is a list of rights and freedoms guaranteed to all people in the country. Democracies strive to respect and protect the human rights of citizens.
6. In a democracy, elected and appointed officials have to be **accountable** to the people. They are responsible for their actions. Officials must make decisions and perform their duties according to the will and wishes of the people, not for selfish reasons.
7. For a government to be accountable the people must be aware of what is happening in the country. This is referred to as **transparency in government**. A transparent government holds public meetings and allows citizens to attend. In a democracy, the press and the people are able to get information about what decisions are being made, by whom and why.
8. One way in which the citizens of the country express their will is by electing officials to represent them in government through **free and fair elections**. Intimidation, corruption and threats to citizens during or before an election are against the principles of democracy.
9. Democratic societies should prevent any elected official or group of people from **misusing or abusing their power**. One of the most common abuses of power is corruption, rigging of elections and violence to achieve their aim.
10. It entails a **multi-party system**, where more than one political party must participate in elections and play a role in governance. It allows a vibrant opposition. Oversight, performance checks and balances are key in every multi-party system.

⁶ Street Law, INC – Principles of Democracy, from Democracy for all. <http://lawanddemocracy.org/pdf/amazing.prin..pdf>

The independency of the five pillars is critical: The executive, the legislative, the judiciary, the media and civil society all have very specific rights, roles and responsibilities that no other actor should perform or interfere with. Democracy is not an event or status or an end goal. It is a process - a journey - that must be continuously nurtured and sustainable.

Why is democracy important?

To answer this question, the United Nation has used the protection of human rights as a core argument for why democracy is important:

*"The values of freedom, respect for human rights and the principle of holding periodic and genuine elections by universal suffrage are essential elements of democracy. In turn, democracy provides the natural environment for the protection and effective realization of human rights. These values are embodied in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and further developed in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights which enshrines a host of political rights and civil liberties underpinning meaningful democracies"*⁷.

The human rights argument is one reason why democracy is important. Other reasons might also exist. In a white paper Sharing for Prosperity (St. Meld 25 [2012-2013] by the Norwegian Government the economic argument is used to explain why democracy is important and why democracy assistance should be given:

*"Once democracy takes root in a society, economic goods tend to be more evenly distributed than in autocracies. Democratic mechanisms in a functioning democracy mean that leaders who fail to live up to their voters' expectations will have to relinquish power. In such situations, more segments of society will benefit than before. This is not automatically the case, however. There are examples of democracies where the distribution of economic goods is becoming increasingly unequal, and of autocracies where the distribution is relatively fair. However, democratic elections, a free press and a free civil society can contribute to putting an end to such unequal distribution"*⁸.

Additionally, good governance honoring democratic principles is seen by many as an important mechanism for fighting the misuse of power where corruption is one of the main challenges. Corruption is a serious obstacle to development. The interlinkages between good governance and development and the interlinkage between good governance countering aid dependency should not be underestimated.

Human rights, the equal distribution of resources and the inclusion of citizens are arguments that have been used for democracy. These are often the rationale for why governments and others support organizations and programs that aim at strengthening democracy and democratic institutions.

Who is benefitting from democracy assistance?

The main objective for every organization, be it non- or inter-governmental, or governments that provide democracy assistance is to support an environment where democratic principles are the basis for the governing and organization of the country. The aim for all involved in democracy assistance is that the citizens will benefit from a system that includes them in the governing of the country, at the national and local level, and better addresses their needs and aspirations.

To achieve this overarching goal, democracy assistance has often focused its efforts on the key institutions in a society. Thomas Carothers in "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose" published in the Journal of Democracy, grouped democracy assistance along the following three main lines⁹:

- 1 support for institutions and processes is crucial to democratic contestation—above all, free and fair elections and political-party development;
- 2 strengthening and reforming key state institutions, especially those checking the power of centralized executives, such as parliaments, judiciaries and local governments; and

⁷ The United Nations – The human rights normative framework https://www.un.org/en/globalissues/democracy/human_rights.shtml

⁸ Sharing for prosperity: Promoting democracy, fair distribution and growth in development policy", Meld. St. 25 [2012-2013] Report to the Storting (White Paper). Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

⁹ Carothers T. [2015] "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose" Published by: Journal of Democracy

- 3 support for civil society, usually in the form of help offered to public-interest NGOs, independent media outlets, labor unions, and civic-education initiatives.

Democracy assistance will focus on the key institutions that can contribute to changing or strengthening ongoing processes in a democratic system. However, there is no “one size fits all” approach to who will be given democracy support. The local context and locally driven initiative will determine which organization, institution or level will be given assistance.

Democracy and democracy assistance providers

The first organizations to provide democracy assistance were the German Party foundations that started as early as in the 1950s to provide international assistance. In the 1980s US based organizations, with the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), National Democratic Institute (NDI), International Republican Institute (IRI) and International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES) were established.

In the beginning most of the assistance was given to countries in Latin America and selected countries in Asia. With the fall of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, countries in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union and the Balkans moved from authoritarian regimes to more democratic systems and received assistance. During the same period, there was change in the governance systems in sub-Saharan Africa, Asia and the Middle East, which opened up possibilities for democracy assistance programs. Since its first steps some 30 years ago, democracy assistance and support to democratic institutions has taken place all over the world, including traditionally more stable (or mature) democratic countries; countries in transition; and countries that are still categorized as authoritarian regimes.

Over the years of democracy assistance more organizations have been formed. These include: The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA), the Swedish Party Foundations, the Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy, the UK based Westminster Foundation, the Danish Institute for Party and Democracy, Demo Finland and The Oslo Center. Over the last decades’ regional democracy assistance providers have been established, for instance the Electoral Institute Southern Africa (EISA) based in Johannesburg, South Africa. The important role played by local NGOs and CBOs in several countries either through partnerships or directly should not be underestimated as a critical actor in democracy assistance.

More governments and international agencies have become more engaged in providing support to institutions and groups that support democratic development. Today, nearly every Western government gives some form of aid for democracy-building, whether through its foreign ministry, international organizations, bilateral-aid agency, or non-governmental organizations.

Democracy assistance is often considered as one of the more challenging forms of international assistance. The assistance and programs supported often address issues and topics that are sensitive and have to engage in issues related to power, influence and the way in which the ruling elite has been governing a country. The local context, social norms and social fabric are often fragile. An idealistic approach in which the assistance aims to defend and support principles of democracy and “doing good” can in some circumstances do more harm, if the local context is not fully understood. This has been one of the criticisms that democracy assistance has met, and is still struggling with. Democracy assistance was often described as the promotion or exporting of “western systems”. However, today there is more awareness of and sensitivity to the context in which the assistance is provided and the need to ensure culture sensitivity. For the Oslo Center this is essential in its approach to democracy assistance.

Another challenge that democracy assistance has met is a lack of a cross sectoral¹⁰ approach to democracy assistance. Assistance provided to institutions has often not been seen as part of the bigger picture of challenges that a country is facing, including socio-economic development. One of the strengths and opportunities of democracy assistance providers is to identify areas where democracy and good governance can be included in work related to important sectors in a country. The Oslo Center’s engagement in the management of natural resources (see sustainable management of natural resources in this booklet) is one example. Accountability and transparency in the natural resource sector and government institutions tasked

with natural resource management can make a positive contribution to fighting corruption, and improving revenue collection and how revenue from the sector is included in the national budget and is more evenly distributed among citizens.

Democratic development is a long-term process. This recognition is an opportunity to further strengthen democracy assistance, including from a funding perspective. It is in the same perspective that donors, assistant providers and national actors and the public involved with democracy assistance must have realistic expectations.

Democracy assistance can take many forms and the assistance can be provided using different means and approaches. However, what must be underlined is that democracy assistance in 2016 is not the same as democracy assistance 30 years ago. The world has changed and so has democracy assistance.

There is more focus on the local context and ensuring that the assistance is provided within often complex systems. For the Oslo Center democracy assistance and the programs implemented are a result of local initiatives and requests with a strong focus on partnerships where national organizations are the leading agents. This is important as it creates a better transfer of knowledge and may secure sustainability in democracy assistance efforts¹¹.

Governments and democracy assistance – Norway, EU and the US:

Governments are the main funders of democracy assistance. More and more governments include democracy assistance as part of their foreign policy strategies and this has been recognized as an important aspect of strategies to promote peace, stability and economic development.

The Norwegian Government in the aforementioned white paper Sharing for Prosperity clearly outlines a policy for democracy assistance. The white paper states how it can best be implemented and also what the aim of such assistance should be:

"Democracy cannot be introduced from the outside, but foreign actors can lend support to democratic processes. Democracy is about changing a society's political culture, and it is crucial that local actors are the driving forces pushing for fundamental democratic reforms at all times. Norwegian support for democracy must therefore take the form of political and material support for local actors"¹².

The European Union has established its own instrument for democracy and human rights (EIDHR). This instrument aims to enable the EU to provide more support for the development of civil societies as key actors for positive change and to provide assistance for the development of democracy, rule of law and the respect of human rights.

The European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) provides assistance for the development and consolidation of democracy, the rule of law and respect for all human rights and fundamental freedoms, where the following is a specific focus: the role of civil society, including a specific reference to the cooperation between civil society, local authorities and relevant state institutions; vulnerable groups; and economic and social rights¹³.

¹¹ For the Oslo Center this is one of the key approaches to democracy assistance. A more in-depth description of the Oslo Center approach is described on page 10-11 in this booklet.

¹² Sharing for prosperity: Promoting democracy, fair distribution and growth in development policy", Meld. St. 25 (2012-2013) Report to the Storting [White Paper]. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

¹³ European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights [EIDHR], http://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/how/finance/eidhr_en.htm_en

Finally, the United States has provided support for democracy assistance for over 30 years. Support and initiatives have focused on:

- Promoting democracy as a means to achieve security, stability, and prosperity for the entire world;
- Assisting newly formed democracies in implementing democratic principles;
- Assisting democracy advocates around the world to establish vibrant democracies in their own countries; and
- Identifying and denouncing regimes that deny their citizens the right to choose their leaders in elections that are free, fair and transparent¹⁴.

Looking at support for democracy assistance, governments have identified the important role of civil society followed by support for the media and judiciary. Electoral support was another area identified early in democracy assistance. Lately, support for the legislative has increased. Political parties are often categorized as the weakest link in strengthening a democratic system since they are often accused of not fulfilling their governing functions. Today more support is given to political parties where the focus is on accountability and transparency, and political parties as representative organizations, inclusive of women and minorities, to mention a few of the focus areas.

What are the challenges for democracy and democracy assistance today?

Many would argue that working with democracy assistance and democracy strengthening is a “never ending story”. There is always a crisis and a transition, or institutions and processes that are in need of assistance in developing and contributing to strengthening democratic systems and democratic performance.

The latest Freedom House Survey published in April 2016 paints a rather gloomy picture of the state of democracy in the world. The report mentions crises in democratic regimes with increases in xenophobic sentiment, state economies’ dependence on the sale of natural resources being undermined, and a tendency of authoritarian regimes to crack down harder on dissents. The latest findings of Freedom House support a ten-year trend of a decline in global freedom. The key findings include:

- The number of countries showing a decline in freedom for the year—72—was the largest since the 10-year slide began. Just 43 countries made gains.
- Over the past 10 years, 105 countries have seen a net decline, and only 61 have experienced a net improvement.
- Ratings for the Middle East and North Africa region were the worst in the world in 2015, followed closely by Eurasia.
- Over the last decade, the most significant global reversals have been in freedom of expression and the rule of law¹⁵.

The state of democracy is being challenged. This might imply that there is more need for democracy assistance. At the same time as Freedom House reports a decline in global freedom, democracy assistance practitioners also experienced a change in the working environment. The international context in which democracy assistance is operating has become more challenging and necessitates a discussion among democracy assistance providers on how to overcome them. The height of democracy just after the 1990s has now turned to a more regressive development for democracy and democratic regimes. Many countries have been observed sliding backwards and the space for opposition, free media and civil society has been limited.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/j/drl/democ/>

¹⁵ Freedom House, <https://www.freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2016>

These trends affect democracy assistance providers. According to Thomas Carothers¹⁶ these are some of the trends that democracy assistance providers have to deal with:

- **A loss of democratic momentum:** The global stagnation of democracy is one of the most significant international political developments of the past decade¹⁷. However, there are promising cases—the times and places when democracy does break through and gain a foothold¹⁸.
- **Closing of doors:** Some governments that had previously allowed in significant amounts of pro-democracy aid began pushing back. This has raised the issue of sensitivity as one of the main features for future democracy assistance work.
- **The troubles of Western democracies:** The struggle of Western liberal democracy to maintain the unrivaled pride of place that it enjoyed in the 1990s also affects democracy aid. Democracy's travails in both the United States and Europe have greatly damaged the standing of democracy in the eyes of many people around the world.
- **A feebler policy commitment:** The waning of global democratic momentum, the growing pushback against democracy aid, the damaged status of Western democracy, and rising competition from non democracies—also influence many Western policy makers and add up to a further challenge: a weakened commitment by established democracies to making democracy support a foreign-policy priority.

There are both challenges and opportunities in democracy assistance. The point and maybe the main challenge today is to find a realistic balance between the challenges and opportunities and asking, what it is possible to do, what should the goal be and what results can be achieved, and at the same time managing expectations. There might be a need for creative thinking regarding where the efforts should be focused and what should be implement and included in democracy assistance programs. Additionally, it will be essential for there to be stronger cooperation and coordination between assistance providers and donors i.e. governments to seek a common understanding that policies towards a country in one area can hamper or in the worst case destroy the efforts make towards democratic strengthening.

The work of democracy assistance providers is challenging. The trends are not necessarily in favor of democracy, its principles and a democratic way of governing. Democracy, even in traditionally strong democracies, is sometimes challenged and questioned. Today we see for instance more cases of corruption and abuse of power in mature democracies. However, the demand for democracy might be the highest ever. More citizens all over the world have better access to information, and a better understanding of the connection between the way the society is being governed and how citizens needs and aspirations are met. Democracy and a democratic system can be the answer if its principles are implemented and its leaders are committed to addressing these needs. It in this complex environment that democracy assistance providers operate.

¹⁶ Carothers T. (2015) "Democracy Aid at 25: Time to Choose" Published by: Journal of Democracy

¹⁷ The Arab Spring in 2011 has often been mentioned as one of the major setbacks in recent years, where steps were taken to change the regime but where the trend now is towards more authoritarian regimes.

¹⁸ Tunisia can be one example. A new constitution was passed and free and fair elections have been held even though the situation has not yet stabilized and the democratic system still is fragile.