Renewing Representation: The role of international assistance in supporting democratic revitalisation

Alina Rocha Menocal         Pilar Domingo
Introduction

On 18-20 June 2018, Westminster Foundation for Democracy (WFD) supported a conference on populism in partnership with:

- International IDEA
- Netherlands Institute for Multi-Party Democracy (NIMD)
- OSCE/ODIHR
- REPRESENT

The event, held in the Belgian Senate, saw leaders from politics, civil society and academia from across the world gather to shape a "Global Agenda for the Renewal of Representation", a guide aimed at reinvigorating the relationship between people and democracy. Alina Rocha Menocal and Pilar Domingo from the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) reflect on how WFD and the broader democracy assistance community can think, learn, and adapt better to contribute to revitalising liberal, representative democracy around the world.

Most countries across the world today are democracies. However, we are at a juncture where the stability and resilience of democracy has come into question, not just in developing settings but also in some of the world’s oldest and most established democracies. Engaging with emerging democracies so that they can work more effectively is the new frontier of the developmental challenge. Deepening the quality of democratic governance is messy, complex, and uncertain. More in-depth thinking about how to reconceptualise and reinvigorate democracy support so that it has greater traction and relevance is needed.

Representation in the age of populism: ideas for global action took place in the Belgian Senate in June 2018. Photo: International IDEA / Geert Vanden Wijngaert ©
1. The nature of the challenge

A major political transformation has taken place following the wave of democratisation that swept across much of the developing world from the 1980s onwards. Today, elections have become almost universal. However, only a small number of new democracies have become rooted, while autocratic tendencies that actively undermine democratic values and fundamental rights and freedoms are getting stronger.

A profound disillusionment with the workings of democracy has set in. More authoritarian models of stability and development have become increasingly appealing, especially in light of China’s remarkable socio-economic success. The widespread recognition that elections alone cannot resolve deeper political and social problems besetting states has led to sobering appraisals about the current health of democratic systems and the need to look more closely at the quality of democratic governance (Munck 2014). Some of the features of democracy under stress include the following:

**Strong-man politics:** Democracy often exists in name only, with many regimes characterised by unaccountable ‘delegative’/strong-man leadership and opaque decision-making processes that often bypass mechanisms of democratic representation.

**Unrealistic expectations:** Across the developing world, too much is expected about what democracies should deliver, much too soon. In fact, many of the institutional features of democracy are intended by design to make decision- and policy-making processes more diffuse – which also makes them more complex and protracted. This does not mean that democracy cannot promote development, but it does mean that it has some built-in features that more authoritarian systems do not need to contend with. More centralised authority in countries like China or in formal democracies like Rwanda or Ethiopia, where power remains heavily concentrated in the Executive, have enabled rulers to pursue their goals more single-mindedly. But this has also led to misplaced
comparisons between struggling and relatively poor performing democracies on the one hand and highly performing autocracies on the other. Such comparisons also assume too easily that more authoritarian systems are automatically more effective, when, historically, they have in fact been more the exception than the rule. On average, democracies have tended to perform better in delivering the things that people want (Halperin et al. 2005).

**Weak state capacity:** Democracy needs an effective state to underpin it. Yet, much current thinking on democracy strengthening assumes that today’s emerging democracies already count on the foundations of reasonably functioning states. However, many countries undergoing democratisation processes are not just trying to put a democratic system in place, but also to build more effective and accountable states capable of providing better services and upholding the rule of law.

**Levels of trust in representative institutions:** Cross-national surveys suggest that political parties and parliaments are consistently ranked as the political organisations and sources of authority that people trust the least (Bergh et al. 2014). This does not mean that all political parties and parliaments everywhere are equally distrusted, but the general trend holds across time and place. This makes the question of how parliaments and political parties can become more effective as pressing as ever: they constitute two of the most crucial institutions of democratic representation and accountability, and however flawed they might be, it is difficult to imagine how democracy can exist without them (Rocha Menocal and O'Neil 2013).

**Inequality and social exclusion:** Growing inequality and social exclusion profoundly undermine democratic institutions (Rocha Menocal 2017). This is evident from the recent rise of populism and nationalist, anti-immigrant discourse worldwide. Inequality and exclusion enable those with resources and power to wield out-sized influence over policy processes, while they skew the provision of essential services away from those most in need. Such imbalances in access, voice, and opportunity disenfranchise segments of the population and can increase support for more extreme political view-points and even violent conflict.

**Revolution in technology and social media:** All these dynamics are compounded by a revolution in information technology that is substantially redefining the nature of state-society relations and the way people engage with organisations of democratic representation and decision-makers within the political system – in both promising and more problematic ways.

### 2. Support to emerging democracies: rising to the challenge

People tend to have quite instrumental views of governance (see Bergh et al. 2014 for example). While surveys show that respondents consistently express a clear preference for democracy in principle, they tend to value political freedoms and democracy mostly in relation to how democracies perform and whether democratic systems provide the expected goods and services. This pressure to deliver places democracy under considerable strain, especially in settings where state institutions remain weak and ineffective. Thus, the question of how to improve the quality of democratic governance while tempering expectations of what democracies should be able to achieve is a leading challenge of the 21st century. Is the international democracy strengthening community up to this task?

**Limitations of democracy support to date**

An honest assessment of the democracy strengthening field would need to recognise that, while there has been some progress, the effectiveness and relevance of such efforts have remained considerably limited. A crucial lesson that has emerged over the past 20 years is that democracy support cannot be approached as an exercise based on pre-made solutions.
The processes it is intended to foster are deeply political in nature, inevitably complex, nonlinear, contested and, ultimately, uncertain. To prove more effective, democracy support (and international development more generally) needs to be much more politically grounded.

**Opportunities for democracy support that is politically smarter**

Over the past decade, international development actors engaged in democracy support (and beyond) have stepped up their efforts to better understand the contexts in which they work through more fine-grained analysis. However, acting on lessons emerging from these analyses and adapting programmes accordingly has remained a much more persistent challenge, and donors continue to rely on more traditional, one size-fits-all forms of engagement (Van Veen and Dudouet 2017).

This is where it gets tricky: how can donors move away from standard menus of support? How can support to elections, parties, constitution-making processes and quotas be undertaken in more politically grounded ways (including working more strategically across these areas)? If we acknowledge that, as important as these different mechanisms of democracy, participation and representation are, they are only a partial element of the puzzle of democratic governance, what other processes of reform can be supported to address the challenges related to the quality of democracy? What would more creative and innovative engagement look like, and how would such initiatives be tracked to ensure that they do not lead to other unintended consequences that can do more harm? (Dodsworth and Cheeseman 2018).

There are no ready answers to these questions. One crucial dimension of this, however, is to start by understanding where pressures for democratic reform are coming from within a given country, how different forces are positioned, what the nature of underlying power dynamics are, how rules of the game play out, and how these different dynamics are linked to subnational, regional, international, and global drivers of
change. Interventions need to be tailored in ways that take these insights into account. For this, international democracy support actors need not only to think in a more politically informed way, but also to work differently.

Addressing international actors’ capabilities to Think and Work Politically (TWP) or to “do development differently” (DDD) is the new frontier for democracy strengthening, and international development more broadly. This includes designing and implementing programmes that are locally led, politically aware and context-sensitive. It also means engaging with existing political incentives and opportunity structures to achieve change, with a focus on how to help broker or facilitate processes of reform or transformation rather than relying solely on technical support. (see Carothers and di Gramont 2013; Booth and Unsworth 2014; Rocha Menocal 2014; TWP 2015).

The call to arms to reorient international support to institutional reform processes towards approaches that are more innovative and politically smart has become mainstream. This need to think in more politically aware ways and work more flexibly and adaptively start from the premise that the critiques of democracy support are not new (Leigh Hunt and Ramshaw 2017). A crucial challenge for democracy support is how to work within this (small) thematic space in ways that are locally grounded in a deep understanding of the political economy of political process (including the role of international development actors within it), and that take account of the intersections of the spaces they inhabit with wider governance and development issues.

What the evidence is saying going forward

Despite considerable progress at the conceptual level, it is still the case that innovation, adaptation and flexible, iterative approaches in democracy support remain rare and are not embedded in programme design. For the most part, logframes are not developed in ways that start with context-specific problems and learning feedback loops to WFD’s programme in Nigeria works with domestic actors to address the issue of under-representation of young people in politics.
incentivise adaptation tend to be absent.

In addition, we still know very little about actual examples of politically smart work on the ground despite (more rigid) programme design. This, however, could be the basis for a live laboratory of lessons learned. An empirical research agenda would involve reconstructing stories of ‘what works’ and assess whether and how different ways of working within the international community helped to make a positive difference. Examples of donors being politically smart include:

- Taking the lead from domestic actors to define the scope of the ‘problem’ in question, and to identify solutions that they consider to be politically plausible and desirable;
- Supporting strategic alliances, and brokering networks and relationships, including with partners that seem less obvious.
- Being politically strategic in calculating when to use international norms as political leverage or when to abstain, because of the risks of backlash, or accusations of undue influence.
- Taking informal institutions seriously, investing in understanding how they shape political decision-making processes, and what opportunities exist in practice to engage with the real (often not visible or public) spaces where power and politics are negotiated (O’Neil 2016).

The importance of working across thematic and sectoral siloes cannot be over-emphasised, given that political development by nature emerges from a combination of institutional change, capacity of individuals to act, and the conditions shaped by the wider political economy. Even within the space of their own mandates, democracy assistance actors need to move outside of their comfort zone and engage more fully with the messiness of political and economic development; and to work more strategically in intersectional ways (Power and Coleman 2011).

Using insights from political economy analysis in concrete ways to identify the incentive structures and windows of opportunity relating to a specific problem can make a positive difference in the work of some actors. This involves orienting political economy analysis from the start to be a meaningful approach in the learning of how change can happen, what incentive and power structures are in place, and how these can be navigated to achieve change.

Challenges for adaptive innovation in democracy support

Why has it proven so difficult to embrace innovative practices more fully in the democracy strengthening field?

- Politically informed and adaptive programming still needs modesty and realism about what outside actors can achieve, especially within short timeframes.

- The internal political economy of donors and implementing organisations, and the incentives and constraints with which they operate need to be explored more thoroughly to better understand why some of the prevalent ways of working remain so sticky, despite repeated lessons accumulated over time.

- Clearly, results and upward accountability matter. However, there is a need for a more honest conversation with the public in donor countries about the challenges of achieving long-term sustainable change in many developing settings, and why results aren’t always tangible and easy to show – especially when considering how little is spent on democracy support in general (Rocha Menocal and O’Neil 2013; Valters and Whitty 2017).

- Politically smarter forms of democracy support require some serious rethinking about how international actors engage in this space. There is a need to change mindsets and to diversify the development and democracy sector. Often, deep country knowledge and presence is a secondary consideration, while organisations tend to privilege technical thematic expertise and formal qualifications over softer skills related...
to how development happens. However, it has become increasingly clear that there is a need for politically skilled and experienced staff, who have operated on the ground for a long time, and who can act as coalition builders and brokers of change.

- While it is essential for international development actors to work in more politically aware ways, the way they go about doing this can be politically sensitive. Acting in ways that are explicitly politically savvy may generate a backlash if those who are in a position of power feel threatened by what they perceive as political interference - and meddling could lead to a curtailment of space to engage in reform efforts for both international and domestic actors.

3. Implications for implementing actors in democracy support efforts

Since 2014, WFD has been proactively rethinking democracy support. This has included inviting a process of critical self-reflection among similar organisations and embracing the need to make the lessons and recommendations from current debates on politically informed, adaptive and flexible ways of working operational and practical. An agenda going forward for politically informed adaptive interventions might include:

**Political economy of funders and implementers of democracy support**

WFD is well placed to facilitate a rigorous process of self-reflection among funders and implementers of democracy assistance on the political economy constraints and contradictions that continue to undermine this agenda.

**Breaking down the siloes, leading an integrated approach to addressing complexity**

Leading by example, WFD can continue its work on integrating parliamentary and party support to move towards more problem-focused rather than solution-based approaches to context specific complexities.

This should entail further reflection about what other key stakeholders and elements of the democracy support agenda WFD can collaborate more fully with, given the challenges at hand, and the need to maintain and nurture the overall focus of its mandate. Through this work, WFD could lead on facilitating more joined-up approaches beyond its specific remit in countries where it has an established presence and track record.

**Addressing key gaps in research and learning**

Understanding what works in practice remains an underdeveloped area of work and engagement. Building this incipient evidence base requires the development of an integrated research agenda that connects thematic, analytical and inter-disciplinary perspectives to probe the connections between international support to democracy, and the political complexities of change in ‘qualities of democracy’. WFD is well placed to convene funders, implementers and academic scholarship in a joint effort to test ongoing attempts to work in more politically smart, innovative, and adaptive ways, and generate greater evidence around that.

Lastly, there is an urgent need to rethink measures of progress in democratic assistance efforts. WFD is in a position where it can connect academic and practitioner-based research on what can constitute reasonable and meaningful progress-based indicators and share lessons across different experiences.
References


Rocha Menocal, A. (2014) "Getting real about politics; from thinking politically to working differently". London: Overseas Development Institute.


Thinking and Working Politically Community of Practice (2015) "The case for thinking and working politically: The implications of ‘doing development differently’".


Van Veen, E. and Dudouet, V. (2017) "Hitting the target, but missing the point? Assessing donor support for inclusive and legitimate politics in fragile societies". Paris: INCAF