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Research Report

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Briefing Paper, No. 1/2009

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Grävingholt, Jörn; Leininger, Julia; Schlumberger, Oliver (2009) : The three Cs of democracy promotion policy: context, consistency and credibility, Briefing Paper, No. 1/2009, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/199633>

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The Three Cs of Democracy Promotion Policy: Context, Consistency and Credibility

Democracy's march to presumed global victory has ground to a halt. Democracy promotion, a boom industry in the 1990s, has come under criticism. While there are still good reasons to promote democracy abroad, there must be some rethinking if new successes are to be

achieved: moving away from unconnected measures in support of individual elements of democracy towards a context-specific, consistent and credible long-term policy of democracy promotion.

Some influential measurements of governance have recently suggested that democracy is globally on the retreat. According to Freedom House, the guarantee of political rights and civil liberties diminished in 20 per cent of all states in 2007 compared to the previous year, and in countries with already questionably low levels of democracy it seemed to be continuing to diminish; previously liberalised or democratised countries, too, were showing signs of regression. Even though these developments may not constitute a robust trend, it is clear that the wave of ever new democratisations has ebbed.

Against this backdrop democracy promotion needs to be reconsidered: first, democratisation is not a one-way street. A democratising country will not automatically end up as a consolidated liberal democracy. Furthermore, authoritarian regimes survived the wave of democratisation in the 1990s, managed to (re)stabilise and proved immune to external pressures for political reform. While democratisation was successful in Eastern Europe, large parts of Latin America and some African countries, entire regions, such as Central Asia, the Middle East, North Africa, parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South and South-East Asia remain under authoritarian rule. Such powerful non-democratic states as China and Russia underpin this situation through their economic and political influence on other countries. As a consequence, democracy is not the rule; the majority of non-OECD countries are only "partly free" or "not free".

Second, international democracy promotion has come under criticism because it has yet to provide convincing evidence of its effectiveness. While it is widely acknowledged that democracy promotion may contribute to democratisation, sustained success always depends on national actors. The only instrument that has a proven track record of inducing democracy is the EU's offer of full membership to accession candidates. Since the enlargement of 2004, however, this instrument has become obsolete, and the question of effective democracy promotion therefore arises anew. This Briefing Paper

presents critical challenges for 21st century international democracy promotion and derives from them ten recommendations for a context-specific, consistent and credible long-term policy of democracy promotion.

Challenges for International Democracy Promotion

Challenges known from development cooperation, such as donor coordination and evaluation issues, also exist in the field of democracy promotion. Above and beyond these, however, democracy promotion is faced with specific problems that clearly distinguish it from other areas of international cooperation. These specifics result from democracy itself: (1) Processes of democratisation are macro-political transformations comprising the rearrangement of political power as the rules of political decision-making undergo fundamental change. Such processes generate resistance and have a high potential for profound and, at times, even violent conflict. Thus democracy promotion – as distinct from sectoral aid policies for health and education, for example – addresses the political process as such. (2) Democracy is a complex system, the effectiveness of its individual elements depending both on one another and on specific contextual conditions. External support for decontextualised individual elements of democracy thus often leads to "façade democracy" only.

Specific challenges in democracy promotion exist on four levels (Fig. 1): (I) available knowledge on the process of and (pre)conditions for democratisation; (II) political decisions in democracy-promoting countries; (III) conceptualisation and implementation of democracy promotion; (IV) assessment of its effectiveness.

Level I: Knowledge deficits

Research on democratisation increased enormously during the 1990s; nevertheless, many of the most pressing questions have been answered no more than partially, if at all. Explanatory approaches that focus on the role and behaviour of collective actors contrast with structuralist approaches, which emphasise the relevance

"Democracy promotion" comprises all non-military means of (re)establishing or strengthening a democratic political order. While a distinction is often made between "democracy assistance" (in the sense of direct, positive measures) and "democracy promotion" (which may also include negative military and/or economic incentives or coercion), we use the term in this paper in the (non-military) sense defined above. Democracy promotion became a central paradigm in Western foreign and development policies during the 1990s, becoming an element of strategies for dealing with such global challenges as poverty alleviation, state-building, civilian conflict management and the fight against terrorism. Annual expenditures on democracy promotion amount today to roughly € 10 bn or nearly 10 per cent of global official development assistance (ODA).

Democracy promotion comprises such activities as support for democratic institutions (e.g. parliaments) and procedures (e.g. elections), human rights, the rule of law and civic education. Donors use sets of instruments that include measures in support of democratic processes that are negative (e.g. conditions attached to loans and grants), positive (e.g. aid to civil society), direct (e.g. capacity-building with parliamentarians) and indirect (e.g. promotion of fiscal transparency).

The legitimacy of democracy promotion needs to be substantiated because it represents an intervention in the political order of sovereign states. Two arguments are usually advanced to justify such intervention:

- *Instrumental argument:* Democracy is supported as a means to an end, that is, the achievement of other aims. In this argument, democracy is regarded as a prerequisite for sustainable, inclusive development, for peace and security or for both.
- *Normative argument:* Democracy is supported as an end in itself. Whether democracy is also conducive to peace and welfare is of secondary importance. Rather, it represents a value in its own right as the only political system that guarantees basic universal rights.

of socio-economic conditions. Yet neither of the two schools of thought can fully explain processes of democratisation. Reliable findings on the catalysts of democratisation and on its evolution are few and far between. There is also a lack of reliable knowledge on the success that individual support measures can be expected to have. While it is undisputed that such factors as timing, institutions and constellations of actors are decisive, democracy promotion is on the whole based on incomplete models. And since hardly two cases are sufficiently alike, the lessons learnt from two decades of practical experience are similarly limited. Fresh investment in research on political transitions and systemic change is therefore needed. In addition, support strategies should draw more heavily on the academic knowledge emanating from such investment.

Level II: Conflicting goals and limited credibility

Western democracy promotion often proceeds without prior settlement of conflicting policy goals. Thus in fragile states (such as Afghanistan) decisions on the role of democracy compared to that of state-building have often been avoided. A dominant strand within the international debate argues that state-building should be prioritised in such cases or there will be no functioning statehood on which to base democracy. In stable authoritarian regimes, on the other hand, donor interests often stand in the way of an effective democracy promotion policy. In resource-rich regions, for example, the aim of Western policies is often to secure access to mineral resources (and thus political stabilisation), not political transition. Similarly contradictory policy goals can be detected in other regions where the pursuit of objectives related to military, geopolitical or energy interests is at odds with the promotion of democracy.

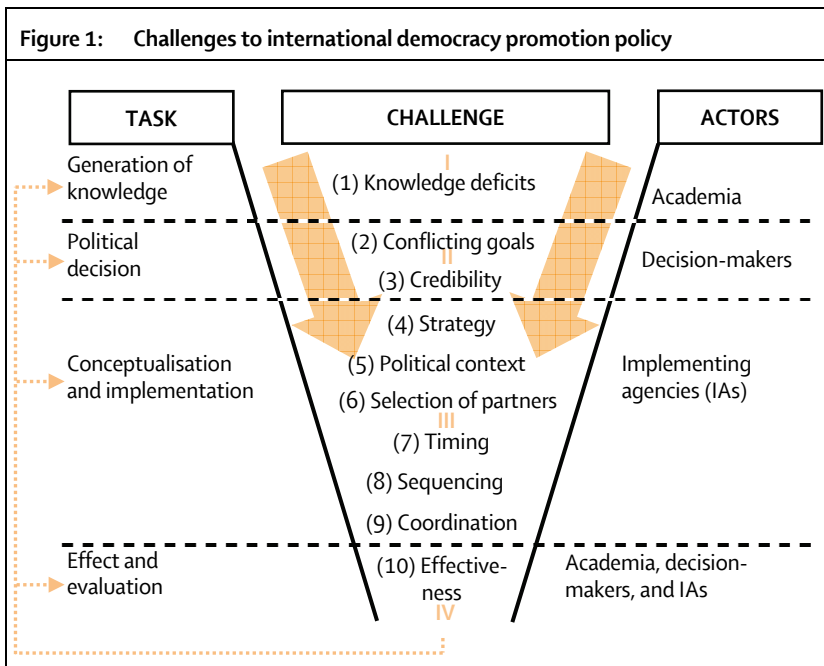
Such conflicting policy goals not only result in contradictory policies, but also nurture doubts among elites and societies in target countries about the credibility of Western engagement for human rights and democracy. Democracy promotion is then at risk of being perceived

as intervention for neo-imperial reasons, which in turn strengthens dictatorships and is detrimental to the spread of universal rights and freedoms. If Western democracies compromise fundamental human and civil rights in the pursuit of other aims, they jeopardise the positive appeal of the Western model of democracy itself – and with it possibly the greatest resource in their struggle to find cooperative solutions to global problems. Effective democracy promotion therefore requires readiness and ability to confront and sustain conflicts of interest: with autocratic elites, with interests in the donor country and with donors who set priorities other than democracy.

Level III: Lack of strategy and ignorance of context

Successful democracy promotion entails having an idea of what means will achieve what ends, and how those ends as a whole are expected to further democratisation. The still widespread assumption that the promotion of features of established democracies automatically helps to democratise non-democratic regimes is misleading. At times, the opposite is true, as when rigged elections or façade parliaments give autocrats the semblance of legitimacy, while the opposition turns its back on future democratic experiments in frustration.

From the planning of democratisation aid to its implementation, the challenge is to develop strategies aimed at long-term, systemic support rather than individual elements that can be easily promoted in the short term, such as support for elections and political parties. The lack of blueprints for successful democratisation must not lead to arbitrariness or the mere copying of preconceived models. Political systems evolve in context, and political transitions, too, depend on context. A high degree of context sensitivity and knowledge of context during policy planning and, on that basis, the development of strategies that are case-specific, appropriate and flexible enough to react quickly to political changes are the *sine qua non* of success.



such cases. Questions of sequencing are especially relevant in such contexts: They require not the promotion of individual elements of democracy, but the opening of the regime to greater pluralism and freedom of speech together with the improvement of the human rights situation and the establishment of the rule of law. Early elections have frequently brought to power populist forces ready to benefit from the democratic process once, but then unwilling to join in a political game with an uncertain outcome. However, there is a limit to sequencing because of the nature and dynamics of political processes. Capacity-building within the state apparatus must avoid contributing to the perpetuation of the structures of authoritarian rule. Otherwise, it should be openly admitted that democracy promotion is not the goal.

Four political contexts each pose different challenges to democracy promoters:

- **Countries in transition:** Here the decision to democratise has been taken, but the rules of the political game are still in flux, i.e. a transition from a non-democratic regime to democracy is being organised. In this context, while democracy promotion supports pro-democratic actors, it also establishes channels of communication between opposing actors, organises roundtables for negotiations on the future political order, discusses constitutional options and helps to create the new institutional set-up. Facing dwindling privileges, former regime members may easily turn into veto players; their integration into a new order thus represents another critical challenge.
- **Young democracies:** At the end of the transition process proper political actors have agreed on basic democratic rules. Democracy promotion then aims at achieving the conditions for a perpetuation of this political order and at consolidating it. Dangers for young or weak democracies emanate from various sources: mass poverty may erode legitimacy and cause an authoritarian backlash. When transition has only just occurred, relations between the *ancien régime* and society are not always clear (e.g. military/security services versus civilian government). External support may help to institutionalise a sustainable *modus vivendi* within a democratic framework.
- **Stable authoritarian regimes:** In such contexts, democratic façades may exist and individuals may demand democratic rules and procedures, but the authoritarian regime controls the political (and often the economic) process.

Here, too, there is room for manoeuvre for democracy promotion, although, strictly speaking, it is more appropriate to refer to “democratisation promotion” in

- **Fragile and failing states:** In this case, the challenge for democracy promotion is, as it were, the reverse of that arising in stable authoritarian contexts: it is not the overriding control capacities of an authoritarian regime that form the key challenge, but the lack of functioning statehood. As democratisation requires at least some functioning state institutions, external aid needs to address statehood first. It should be borne in mind, however, that the very first steps in this direction lay the foundations for a country’s future institutional development. The building of state institutions need not meet all the requirements of democratic governance from the very beginning, but it must be compatible with them in the long term and must not lead to the emergence of new autocratic elites. Thus careful thought must be given not only to choosing the right first step (state-building) but also to the consequences for the second and third steps (the rule of law and democratisation).

Making a distinction between different intervention contexts shows that democracy promotion policy needs sound context analyses. They include:

- The selection of *appropriate partners* for cooperation
- The choice of *appropriate timing* for the use of different instruments
- The *sequencing of support measures* in line with the context in question

Only on this basis is it possible to devise concrete strategies. Strategy means planning measures in the light of appropriate timing, sequencing and systemic interdependencies. It also means assessing *ex ante* the risk of unintended side-effects, considering the effects of policies in other areas (security, energy, foreign trade, etc.), and devising coherent democracy promotion policies accordingly.

Such an approach necessarily requires comprehensive coordination among all the ministries concerned. It can be implemented neither by aid administrations alone nor without them. International donor coordination is, moreover, particularly difficult in the case of democracy promotion. The usual reference to practical constraints in (inter)national cooperation does not refute the argument that democracy promotion without sufficient coordination often does more harm than good!

Level IV: Problems in proving effectiveness

In democracy promotion evaluation is usually restricted to individual direct measures (input) and project output. There is no convincing evidence that democracy promotion is effective on a macro-systemic level (except in the case of EU enlargement policy). Specific efforts to provide such evidence have remained methodologically unsatisfactory. In democracy promotion the "attribution problem" is exacerbated: which macro-political results can be causally attributed to which measures? Furthermore, essential areas of democracy promotion, such as sensitive political dialogue, cannot be checked for effectiveness because of their confidentiality.

Evaluation should therefore be undertaken from a macro-systemic perspective and begin with two basic measures: first, an examination of all policies pursued by a state in another country: do they comply with an overall strategy that provides coherent and significant incentives for democratisation? Democracy promotion cannot be successful while other policies are effectively stabilising authoritarian rule. Second, periodical analyses of the political system to identify any shifts in the balance of power and any changes in critical functional mechanisms in that system.

Conclusion

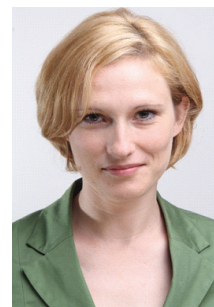
Two decades of practical experience and academic analyses make it possible to lay down some general rules for "good" democracy promotion, which, by analogy with Figure 1 above, can be summarised in ten recommendations for planning and implementation (see box). Key among them are *context knowledge*, *consistency of strategies* and *credibility*.

Ten recommendations for democracy promotion

1. *Investment in knowledge*: Democracy promotion policies require (more) reliable knowledge of what triggers or prevents democratisation and how such processes evolve.
2. *Addressing conflicting policy goals*: Democracy promotion is not always the most urgent task, but where it is, other policy goals must be subordinated to it; otherwise, success is unlikely.
3. *Credibility*: Democracy promotion requires that donor countries pursue consistent foreign policies towards target countries and set a good example by acting democratically themselves.
4. *Knowledge of context*: Knowledge or ignorance of the local balance of power and of informal rules and processes determines the success of an intervention as early as the planning stage.
5. *Consistency of strategy*: Democratisation is a long-term, macro-systemic and non-linear process – interventions must be planned according to their overall effects.
6. *Selection of partners*: "Change agents" and actors who contribute to either the establishment or the erosion of a democratic order vary with the situation in individual countries.
7. *Timing of intervention*: Opportunities for political transformation change over time. It is essential to be able to react quickly to changed circumstances.
8. *Adequate sequencing*: Human rights, for example, are a priority, whereas free elections often bring decisive progress only at a later stage.
9. *Internal and external coordination*: If incentives for democratisation are to be effective, synergies must be exploited and counterproductive effects avoided, whether they emanate from other policy areas or other international actors.
10. *Evaluation*: Rather than considering project output, evaluation should be undertaken from macro-systemic perspectives and assess the coherence and significance of overall policy input while identifying any meaningful structural changes in the target country's political system.



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