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Research Report

Danish development cooperation experiences in contexts of autocratisation

DIIS Report, No. 2024:13

Provided in Cooperation with:

Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen

Suggested Citation: Moe Fejerskov, Adam; Rosengren Pejstrup, Trine (2024) : Danish development cooperation experiences in contexts of autocratisation, DIIS Report, No. 2024:13, ISBN 978-87-7236-173-4, Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS), Copenhagen

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/311728>

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DIIS – DANISH INSTITUTE FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

Danish development cooperation experiences in contexts of autocratisation

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Publication date:
2024

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for pulished version (APA):

Fejerskov, A. M., & Rosengren Pejstrup, T. (2024). *Danish development cooperation experiences in contexts of autocratisation*. Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS). DIIS Report Vol. 2024 No. 13

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The background of the cover is a photograph. The top half shows a close-up of multiple layers of coiled barbed wire against a clear blue sky. The bottom half shows a large, multi-story white building with a red-tiled roof and many windows, viewed through a chain-link fence. The building is situated behind a body of water.

DANISH DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION EXPERIENCES IN CONTEXTS OF AUTOCRATISATION

Adam Moe Fejerskov and Trine Rosengren Pejstrup

This report is written by Adam Moe Fejerskov, Senior Researcher, PhD, and Trine Rosengren Pejstrup, Research Assistant, DIIS, and is published by DIIS.

This publication is funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark under the FEB programme (*Forskning og Evaluering af Bistanden*). The content of the report is the authors' responsibility alone and does not reflect the position of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Denmark.

The authors are grateful for the inputs from relevant staff in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs as well as at relevant embassies. Special thanks are reserved for Eva Brandt Broegaard, Marina Buch Kristensen, and Ninja Ritter Klejnstrup (MFA) as well as Lars Engberg-Pedersen and Ole Winckler Andersen (DIIS) for comments on drafts.

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Cover photo: Sisse Dupont/Jyllands-Posten/Ritzau Scanpix

(Yangon, Myanmar, ID: 20120106-222346-pf)

Graphic setup: Tarm Bogtryk as

ISBN: 978-87-7236-173-4 pdf

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	5
Strategic and programmatic challenges: recent studies	8
Review of cases	14
Burkina Faso	14
Ethiopia	17
Mali	21
Myanmar	27
Syria	31
Uganda	34
Key discussion points and conclusion	42
References	49

INTRODUCTION

The past decade ushered in an almost historic backslide towards more autocratic forms of governance. Today, for the first time in almost thirty years, the world has more closed autocracies than liberal democracies, and the past two years alone have seen nine new countries move into this category. With it follows deteriorating freedoms of expression, rule of law, election quality, as well as heightened media censorship and repression of civil society organizations.

Recent OECD estimates accentuate how autocratic regimes consume an increasing portion of official development assistance (ODA) flows, up from 64 percent in 2010 to 79 percent in 2019. This is not least due to growing autocratisation, with the number of ODA recipient countries categorized as autocratic increasing from 68 in 2010 to 75 in 2019 and the several countries that have moved from electoral democracy to electoral autocracy during the period. Between 2010 and 2019, as an example, the amount of people in ODA partner countries living in democracies declined from 44 to 21 percent. The same period, from 2010 and 2019, saw a 19-fold increase in humanitarian support to closed autocracies.

With roughly half of all people living in poverty based in so-called 'estranged regimes', there is no choice: development partners are pushed to engage the challenging circumstances in autocratic contexts. Recent years' developments in several fragile countries and regions have seen conflicts, repressive regimes, corruption, poor governance, and violations of international humanitarian law and basic rights make state-to-state cooperation particularly. Yet processes of autocratisation often span many years, are situated within larger historical contexts, and end up shaping

political relations between the ruling authorities and major development partners for decades.

Under such challenging conditions, the needs of recipient populations persist and often increase. Though accounting for ten percent of the world's population, it is expected that fragile and conflict-affected states and contexts (FCS) will host more than sixty percent of the people living in extreme poverty by 2030. There is a continued need then for both development and humanitarian engagement to localize, provide urgent services, and prevent further weakening of livelihoods and societal structures. However, conventional approaches might not be viable given the complexity of the security and political contexts, as relations between donor countries and ruling governments deteriorate, diplomatic ties are cut, and collaboration with local partners is stalled.

International strategies to address autocratic regimes are increasingly characterized by the implementation of sanctions, limitations on, or complete discontinuation of development assistance. Development partners regularly find themselves under pressure from elected officials and public opinions to discontinue development assistance, to not be seen as collaborating with illegitimate regimes. However, the suspension of aid or sanctioning of countries can worsen existing challenging circumstances and widen established gaps of inequality. Sanctioning development aid risks increasing population's vulnerability and worsen socio-economic structures. If not done 'smartly', i.e. in deliberate and targeting-conscious forms that do not punish populations, international sanctions too may risk heightening tensions and escalation of conflicts that may induce spill-over effects on neighboring countries or regions. Furthermore, as circumstances worsen, efforts of reengagement for donors become increasingly difficult and costly.

Altogether, these settings and conditions pose significant challenges for accountability, inclusion, and delivery of support and assistance at the intersections of political and technical concerns. There is a need to better understand ODA programming in challenging regime contexts, crucial from a perspective of supporting development without necessarily supporting political regimes and stressing the importance of continuous localization of engagements. Recent studies focusing on development cooperation and ODA in autocratic and sanctioned countries have shed light on the intricate dynamics and complex political and operational dilemmas under these circumstances. OECD's GovNet is in the process of investigating how ODA is linked to regime contexts, and how donors relate and respond to changes in regime types. It published the report 'Official Development

Assistance by Regime Context (2010-2019)' in 2022 and is currently exploring the possibility of investigating case countries of 'autocratising contexts' in Bangladesh, India, Thailand, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Benin, Burkina Faso, and Mali. Likewise, the Swedish MFA financed Chatham House and NYU's Center for International Cooperation's 2023 report on Aid strategies in 'politically estranged' settings.

The purpose of this study is to review selected Danish experiences of responding to autocratisation in partner countries and indicate potential avenues of investigation for future evaluations of the questions explored. It has combined document analysis with interviewing of relevant embassy and Copenhagen-based staff for six identified cases: Burkina, Ethiopia, Mali, Myanmar, Syria, and Uganda. These cases run across a spectrum of autocratisation from critical junctures to incremental changes and are fundamentally diverse, but that is also why they have been selected for this study. At the same time, they incorporate elements of fundamental adjustments and suspensions of Danish development aid because of processes of autocratisation, lending themselves for an interesting cross-view. The purpose for all the cases is to briefly review the context of changes pertaining to autocratisation and then expand upon how Denmark has reacted to these changes both programmatically and diplomatically within a designated time-period. This allows the study to draw out Danish experiences and indicate potential avenues of investigation for future evaluations of the questions explored, including core issues and key questions.

Several caveats and limitations apply here. As for the cases, limitations to data collection means they unfold in their individual form and have not been analyzed through a systematic analytical framework, some shorter and some longer depending on available data. Importantly, the study does not assess the impact, outcomes, or appropriateness of Danish decisions made in reaction to processes of autocratisation – which are all evaluation questions requiring more expansive and in-depth methodology and resources. Meaning we may analyze the speed at which certain adaptations were made, but not the question of whether or not they were made too fast or too slow, or in the right form.

STRATEGIC AND PROGRAMMATIC CHALLENGES: RECENT STUDIES

Increasing autocratisation poses complex strategic and programmatic challenges to development partners in supporting local development without necessarily supporting political regimes. The decision to stay engaged is particularly complicated by the risk of legitimizing illegal or illegitimate regimes while balancing the need for ongoing delivery of basic social services and humanitarian assistance. These moral and political grey zones, therefore, often result in donor ambiguity on how to engage.

Recent studies have examined the challenges and possibilities for continued engagement and ongoing collaboration with authorities in increasingly complex contexts. Amongst these is the Chatham House and New York University's (NYU) Center for International Cooperation's 2023 report **Aid strategies in 'politically estranged' settings**, financed by the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA). One of the key obstacles to continued engagement considering rising autocratisation, the report outlines, is that of accountability. Relations of accountability in these contexts are under pressure from all angles. Both between national authorities of the receiving country and their population, national authorities and donor country, as well as the donor country and its own population, where the public perception of the situation can pressure the government to limit or suspend aid (Cliffe et al., 2023).

This often leaves humanitarian actors in a complex situation negotiating with donor countries, their own headquarters, as well as national authorities in the recipient countries. Yet, as the report argues, 'there are sound national interest, geopolitical, collective security and ethical reasons for donors to meet urgent needs; prevent further social and economic disruption and spillovers; increase resilience; and support a transition to normal relations where possible' (Cliffe et al., 2023). As

increasing political and economic instability often entails a rise in humanitarian needs, humanitarian aid can become a stand-in for state services. However, constructing means of delivering basic services that bypass the state can have long-term implications for countries. For example, it could serve the national authorities by providing basic services and security for its population, saving the authorities both responsibility and expenses, or produce parallel structures that are unsustainable.

A Humanitarian Outcomes report from June 2023, **Navigating Ethical Dilemmas for Humanitarian Action in Afghanistan**, commissioned by the UK Humanitarian Innovation Hub, points to difficulties in association or risk of complicity as part of central donor concerns. The population of the recipient country are often caught between two actors trying to influence each other. Foreign governments wanting to influence national authorities for example through sanctions, while national authorities introduce certain criteria for engagement by donor countries in seeking recognition and control. By complying with restrictions and demands upheld by national authorities, development partners can be placed in positions of having to seek permissions to operate in certain areas or with population groups in need of humanitarian assistance (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2023).

In Afghanistan, the by-far most discussed context of these dilemmas, development partners have long had to balance demand from local authorities around recruitment, distribution, and access both before and after the Taliban return. The Humanitarian Outcomes study finds that the ‘dilemmas around whether humanitarian aid is enabling discrimination, exclusion, and abuse through how it is targeted or delivered when authorities are controlling, abusive and coercive have been part of the day-to-day challenges of how aid agencies operate in Afghanistan for many years’ (Humanitarian Outcomes, 2023). Engagement with autocratic governments can also risk setting an unfortunate precedent for other humanitarian organizations by accepting certain limitations to its width of assistance or restrictions on recruitment. The Taliban-government has, for example, required humanitarian organizations to ban female members of staff, which is just one amongst many limitations on aid agencies. Complying with such requirements could set forth a precedence for aid agencies in other contexts limiting their ability to operate freely and support women’s rights. Ultimately, this results in questions around donor accountability. If development partners become increasingly hesitant to provide funding for humanitarian aid in Afghanistan due to the escalating restrictions imposed by the Taliban, their capacity to adapt and allocate resources for local-level negotiations, which are essential for seeking local solutions, will be compromised.

Under autocratic circumstances, context-specific and local knowledge is key in decision-making processes, especially concerning questions around inclusion. Development partners are faced with a lack of access to knowledge and gaps in insight, which constitute a central obstacle to their ability to identify the best possible framework for engagement. The limited information on the local context and specific needs on the ground coupled with little coordination amongst various donating actors challenges the ability to provide effective assistance. As the Chatham House report concludes: 'navigating which institutions, communities or groups to assist requires context-specific, often highly localized analysis; clearly articulated expectations as to how recipients are expected to act, especially around the provision of services to people; and careful monitoring of the extent to which conditions are being met' (Cliffe et al., 2023). Development partners rely on significant insight concerning internal political dynamics, alliances, and complex historical contexts to cement the effectiveness and quality of their engagement. Without proper analysis of political dynamics, well-intentioned humanitarian and development efforts runs the risk of ineffectiveness or, worse, doing harm. The ODI Lessons for Peace (L4P) project from 2022, funded by the Australian Government, finds that the reengagement of international partners in Afghanistan in 2001 was characterized by preconceived ideas about legitimacy and governance, alongside a disregard towards 'patterns of authority grounded in historic, cultural, social, ethnic, regional, kinship and religious structures'. The L4P study points to a central failure to understand the complexity of Afghan political economy, which it links to a range of perverse incentives and counterproductive effects such as driving corruption and fueling competition over resources. Particularly difficult is the assessment of state institutions and civil servants in the receiving country and the level of trust they can be accredited for possible collaboration and assistance. ODI's study argues that the long-established principles and historic traditions of Afghanistan became a blind spot for international engagement. Modes of partner collaboration would in some cases collide with 'traditional Afghan power-sharing practices, and with Afghans' deep-rooted concepts of independence, shared Islamic identity, and resentment of foreign interference' (McKechnie, Bowden & Laws, 2022).

By understanding, adhering to, and establishing patterns of authority with local governance practices – i.e. so-called 'working with the grain' approaches – international engagement may be able to find paths of successful engagement. In 2023, the Dutch Ministry of Foreign Affairs launched an evaluation report on Dutch humanitarian aid from 2015-2021, that identified as key strategic and programmatic challenges, localization and trust. The report finds that despite international promises of increased localization, a lack of trust in local actors has stood in the way

of implementing moves to localize development efforts (IOB, 2023). This goes hand-in-hand with both a poor perception of the local capacity and risk-aversiveness from donors, which has resulted in higher requirements for local actors. Identifying which communities and institutions need assistance can be a particularly intricate matter for development partners when established frameworks for cooperation are suspended or ill-suited to the specific circumstances. The Dutch evaluation discusses these issues based on a case-study of its involvement in Syria. Here, the Dutch Humanitarian Aid Division reports to have struggled with the balance between meeting the humanitarian needs of the Syrian people and adhering to the Dutch political stance on the Assad regime. As the crisis in Syria continues, sustaining basic services would include a risk of indirectly supporting the national government. The Dutch report points to this as part of a broader move towards more 'pragmatic' approaches. The challenges around neutral aid delivery are not unique to the case of Syria but exist in most fragile contexts. Some degree of risk and compromise must be expected when engaging in complex political contexts (IOB, 2023).

A variety of practical challenges relating to managing the delivery of aid becomes evident in contexts where relations of accountability between national authorities and donor country are either strained or non-existent. The Chatham House report points out that 'when donor–recipient relations break down, the default approach of most DAC donors is to focus on basic services – primarily healthcare, education and social protection' (Cliffe et al., 2023). Not providing essential services can undermine people's access to basic humanitarian support, which could cause a renewed economic or political crisis. However, humanitarian and development responses often lack the resources and capacity to sustain such efforts during ongoing crisis or enduring conflicts and are, therefore, unable to substitute state provision of services. An attempt to do so will most likely require some level of collaboration with state structures, which ultimately brings us back to questions of association and risks of complicity, or otherwise run the greater risk of creating parallel structures. Access to people in need and local institutions is also a central obstacle to staying engaged. Certain areas, institutions, or population groups can be restricted by the national government or by the administration of a humanitarian organization or a nation's own government for security reasons. This limits the possibilities for engagement by donors and humanitarian actors in very tangible ways. Not only is the proximity to the affected population limited, but the ability also to assess the situation on the ground and acquire local knowledge can be heavily constricted, hindering effective delivery of aid.

With or without suspension of engagement, adaptability to the situation and its involvement is an obvious core concern for development partners, as we will also see

in the cases explored here. Bypassing national authorities to provide basic services for a population can be part of an immediate reaction to worsening circumstances or escalating conflicts (Cliffe et al., 2023). However, short-term and reactive engagement, rather than strategic, risks ignoring long-term objectives to secure a stable political settlement, peace, and increases in standards of living. Lack of political strategy, ethical guidelines, and donor presence has been raised as key issues by humanitarian actors working under these conditions. ODI's L4P research finds that besides placing tremendous responsibility on the shoulders of humanitarian organizations, a lack of political strategy has, such as in the case of Afghanistan, resulted in development and humanitarian aid being based on short-term goals and needs.

Most man-made crises eventually turn lengthy, complex, and multifaceted, requiring not only enhanced flexibility and willingness to adapt but also greater need for political engagement and proactiveness from development partners (McKechnie, Bowden & Laws, 2022). ODI's work on development engagements in Afghanistan has also shed light on the variety of solutions humanitarian organizations take into play to navigate both their humanitarian responsibilities and the inherent risks, finding that their approach has been 'thoroughly pragmatic and ad hoc', lacking strategic direction and ethical frameworks for engagement. This is echoed in the Dutch aid evaluation report, which describes a turn to a more 'pragmatic approach' to humanitarian and development assistance in recognition of humanitarian actors' struggles with neutrality and impartiality (McKechnie, Bowden & Laws, 2022). It emphasizes an understanding of future needs being met more efficiently by development partners accepting political risks – such as the risk of indirectly supporting national authorities – and embracing increased flexibility around programming.

Although it's impossible to completely eradicate all risks, there are several mechanisms and tools that allow donors to engage in countries under sanctions or affected by conflict without neglecting human rights law and international sanctions. A NYU Center on International Cooperation report, **The World's Humanitarian, Economic, and Political Engagement with Afghanistan**, funded by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs concludes that 'more is gained by careful engagement than by disengagement' (Fishstein & Farahi, 2023). In politically fragile contexts, continued engagement requires a certain level of flexibility in development programming. Adaptive programming suitable to the political context includes regular reviews of and rapid implementation of changes to program designs (Fishstein & Farahi, 2023). This is echoed by Chatham House, which concludes on

an additional range of approaches to challenging political contexts and modalities to deliver aid from which donors can meet the needs of the receiving population bearing in mind the risks of engaging in these settings. Specifically, it highlights the significance of collaboration across the humanitarian-development-peace nexus to maintain domestic support, negotiate conditions with national authorities, design suitable modalities, and adapting development and humanitarian programs to local conditions in a rapid manner (Cliffe et al., 2023). Ring-fencing, which can include separation of financial accounts and non-salary expenditures, as well as non-governmental organization (NGO) contracting are examples of short-term modalities put forth in the report. Long-term development modalities can include utilizing regional programs and community-driven development programs to maintain relations between donors and national authorities.

Community driven approaches are also highlighted in a background paper for the Chatham House report, by the Center on International Cooperation, NYU. The paper, *Alternative Aid Modalities: Community Development*, commissioned by the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Swedish Ministry of Foreign Affairs presents examples of community-based approaches for delivering and monitoring aid. It finds that development engagement centered around community-based local governance – which fits under the mainstream concept of localization – has proven successful in a variety of complex contexts (Guggenheim & Petrie, 2022). Support to local governance should, the paper argues, be both long-term and relatively predictable for the best possible outcome. Concerns of corruption and misuse of funds is also a sensitive issue for development partners and public opinion. Aid modalities and sufficient oversight can be designed and set in place to prevent funds from being diverted to elite groups in the recipient country and for rapid response and adaption to instances of corruption (Guggenheim & Petrie, 2022).

Overall, recent work highlights the significance of adaptive approaches that consider the ever-changing landscapes of contexts characterized by autocratisation. Development partners face a variety of strategic and programmatic challenges staying engaged in increasingly autocratic settings including maintaining donor domestic support for such engagement, sustaining paths of collaboration with national authorities, identifying effective delivery methods and ability to oversee delivery activities, as well as reviewing and adapting programs according to the local political circumstances. The evolution of donor relations requires tailored strategies that navigate the delicate balance between engagement and addressing human rights concerns.

REVIEW OF CASES

Next, six cases running across a spectrum of autocratisation from critical junctures to incremental changes – Burkina Faso, Mali, Myanmar, Syria, Ethiopia, and Uganda – are explored with a view to what characterized the countries' processes of recent autocratisation, and the changes made to Danish development cooperation in response to the specified period or event of autocratisation.

BURKINA FASO

A deteriorating security situation and political uncertainty has characterized Burkina Faso since 2014, when President Blaise Compaoré attempted to circumvent the constitution in a bid to extend his 27-year rule of the country. Following substantial popular uprising and unrest, Compaoré declared a state of emergency and fled to neighboring Côte d'Ivoire. In late September 2015, members of the Regiment of Presidential Security (RSP – formed under Compaoré) detained the transitional government and instated itself as a junta, before the army entered Ouagadougou and ended the coup. In November, elections awarded Roch Marc Christian Kaboré with the presidency, just as he was re-elected in November 2020. In the interim period, attacks and kidnappings by groups associated with ISIL and Al Qaeda had escalated significantly in the north and east of the country, including in the capital, displacing more than a million Burkinabé. As one instance among many, in June 2021, several hundred people were killed in the north-eastern town of Solhan in the Yagha province – attributed to but denied by the JNIM Islamist armed group (Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin) – sparking civil uprising and the firing of the minister of defense.

In January 2022, leading military figure Paul-Henri Sandaogo Damiba (also of the presidential guard) led a coup that detained and disposed of President Kaboré and Prime Minister Lassina Zerbo, the fourth coup in the region in 18 months. Damiba, who had briefly been leading an anti-terrorist ministry and vividly argued for the use of Russian Wagner mercenaries (refuted by Kaboré), dissolved the Government and National Assembly before instating himself as interim president, leading ECOWAS to suspend Burkina Faso's membership. Failing to counter the Islamist insurgents – who even increased their attacks during his rule and grew their control of territory – Damiba was ousted by military officers in a new coup in September 2022 led by Ibrahim Traoré, and later fled to exile in Togo. The coup was widely condemned by Western powers, yet Wagner lead Yevgeny Prigozhin praised Traoré as a 'son of the motherland' and also credited Damiba for exposing the last colonial remnants. Russian troops had been stationed in Burkina Faso since ultimo January of the same year.

In April 2023, Human Rights Watch reported on what would be known as the Karma massacre in which almost two hundred civilians were killed by the Burkinabé army in the northern Yatenga province in a suspected retaliation for Islamist attacks. The severity of trans-border armed conflict in the Sahel, significant levels of risks of violence, and high frequency of attacks, led interim President Traoré to declare a 'general mobilisation' in spring 2023 alongside an 'advisory' that gives him the right to requisition people, goods and services and the right to restrain certain civil liberties'. The extremely volatile security situation now sees more than 2 million internally displaced and 5.5 million in need of humanitarian assistance, 3.2 millions of these children, with a heavily underfunded humanitarian response plan and de facto inaccessibility of basic social services. Over the past decade, Burkina Faso has moved from what has been deemed the 'semi-authoritarian' 27 years of Compaoré rule to Kaboré's considerable curtailment of civil liberties to the current situation of perpetual transition in which states of emergency enable repression. Currently, with the escalating security situation resulting from the jihadi insurgency and widespread banditry, post-coup dynamics, and political authority remains unclear with limited outlook for political-economic transformation, exacerbated by the mounting pressure of domestic grievances and spillover effects from neighboring countries.

Changes to Danish development cooperation

Danish bilateral cooperation with Burkina Faso for the period in view was strategically codified in the Country Programme 2016-2020 that had three main priorities: human rights and stability (through an integrated approach to promote rule of law able to provide multiple benefits, but also areas of intervention with which the embassy had

limited prior experience, such as justice and police); water and sanitation (integrated water resources management and mainstreaming of the human rights based approach); and economic growth in the agricultural sector (ongoing since 2013, engaging more structured and organized partners with fewer, more focused value chains introduced, including at decentralized levels). A 2018 midterm review found that government institutions were relatively well-functioning and that economic growth perspectives were overall favorable, that the programme was being adapted to support Burkina in the changed context of governance, and came with recommendations to allocate additional funds to human rights and security because of the deteriorating security situation.

The succeeding Country Strategic framework, 2021-2025, planned to disburse a little more than a billion DKK over the period, and focus on enhancing security, rule of law, human rights, and effectiveness of national institutions with a view to support containment of the escalating conflict as well as addressing 'structural causes of fragility through support to international and regional security and stabilization efforts and support to building strong, legitimate public institutions and civil society in Burkina Faso'. Other priorities include promotion of local community, and national economic, resilience as well as support to the development of climate-change adaptation measures. The framework gives explicit weight to more flexibility that will 'allow Denmark to adapt its engagement in response', including through re-allocation of resources from state to non-state actors, reconsideration of geographical targeting and delivery modalities of development investments, and identification of new engagements, partners and instruments suited to a worsened situation. An adaptive and iterative approach was, in other words, adopted as a general principle.

Following Damiba's coup in January 2022, Denmark found itself in the worst-off scenario identified in the newly introduced Country Strategic Framework, but far swifter than imagined. A decision was made to make adjustments to its engagement in Burkina Faso and Budget support provided to the ministry of water was put on hold until a realistic transitional plan was presented for returning to democratic governance, and so was project support to the ministry of security. All other engagements, including support to the ministry of justice, remained in order to continue support to the Burkinabe people, whose resilience was seen as key in withstanding the impact of fragility and insecurity. Denmark was among the first from the group of likeminded to adapt its support, and while the World Bank and the African Development Bank also swiftly chose to suspend disbursements in accordance with their general policies concerning military coups, the European Union (EU) did not initially decide to put budget support on hold.

With the second coup in 2022, in September, and the deteriorating human security situation, a number of Danish activities within agriculture, resilience, water and sanitation became increasingly difficult to implement. Danish sector budget support to the ministry of water has been reallocated other activities in the water sector, whilst support to the ministry of security and the ministry of justice has been terminated and redirected towards other bilateral priorities, including activities on community resilience and WASH (on the basis of an analysis of where the funds could best support the Burkinabe population). The reallocations rested on the conclusion that it seemed infeasible to resume these activities in the country programme's foreseeable future and that other bilateral engagements were prepared to have their support scaled up. At this time, most EU member state development partners present had adjusted their bilateral engagements but also reiterated the need to stay engaged (though some on the condition that the Wagner group would not be engaged by the military rulers), and the Commission adjusted its general budget support for the central government to project support.

ETHIOPIA

Political authority in Ethiopia has seen fluctuating degrees of authoritarianism over the past decades, situating it simultaneously in processes of incremental autocratisation but with ruptures both exacerbating and improving the political situation. Under Meles Zenawi's rule of the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) (since the 1991 overthrow of the Derg military junta), the country saw both social reforms and moves towards political, media, and civil suppression and oppression. Aside from questionable elections and certain emerging internal conflicts, this was perhaps most clear to the international public with the restrictive Charities and Society Proclamation of 2009 that effectively curtailed civil society organizations from carrying out rights-based activities, advocacy, or conflict resolution if they received more than 10 percent of their funding from foreign sources, de facto quenching such efforts.

Throughout EPRDF's rule and growing autocratisation, the country still received extensive influx of development aid. Partly because of the immense challenges with extreme poverty, displacement and humanitarian crises because of droughts and other events, but also because it has long assumed a position as a strong and somewhat stable force in a context of fragility and conflict in the Horn (and remained a major United States (US) ally). And despite being a coalition and enshrining a right to self-determination in the Ethiopian constitution, Tigray People's Liberation Front or TPLF (representing some 6 percent of the population) dominated EPRDF and thus

Ethiopian politics. While Meles' authority somehow managed to keep growing grievances among other ethnic (or ethnoregional) groups in check, his death in 2012 and the transfer of power to Hailemariam Desalegn saw the effects of political and social marginalization – and the unequal distribution of resources and poverty eradicating efforts across the whole of the country – build to a point at which something drastic had to happen. Inter-ethnic divisions quickly grew loud, escalating political instability and leading to popular protests in 2016, and recurring state of emergencies, before Oromo and Amhara constituents in EPRDF ousted Hailemariam, paving the way for a surprising selection of Abiy Ahmed as the new Prime Minister in 2018, and the first Oromo to hold the office.

Abiy brought with him an immense excitement and promise (at the time referred to by Ethiopians as 'Abiymania'), laying out a plan for democratic reforms, lifting the totalitarian CSP law from 2009, and reassuming relations with Eritrean dictator Isaias Afwerki, earning him the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize. Yet TPLF and the Tigrayan political leaders quickly felt marginalized and frustrated, leading Abiy to eventually disband EPRDF and form the self-described 'countrywide' Prosperity Party (that remains organized along ethnic lines despite its stated intention to move away from the country's ethnic federalism), which TPLF refused to take part in and considered illegitimate. In 2020, parliamentary elections were postponed due to Covid-19, yet TPLF decided to hold a regional election, and the political relations between Abiy and TPLF greatly deteriorated. A military conflict between the federal government and TPLF seemed unavoidable and in November 2020, on the eve of the US elections, war broke out. Federal forces, as well as Eritrean forces attacking from the north – Abiy's peace agreement with Eritrea turned out to most likely having been a military pact against their common enemy – quickly gained control over Tigray. Yet retreating rather than surrendering allowed Tigrayan forces to reassume control over their territories in mid-2021 and eventually push almost all the way to the capital (in alliance with the Oromo Liberation Army and a number of smaller rebel groups), where Abiy encouraged all citizens to take up arms against the 'terrorists'. A successful counter-offensive by the government pushed the Tigrayan troops back, and after several truces and restarts to the conflict, in November 2022, two years after the start of the war, a peace accord between the government and Tigrayan leaders were mediated by the African Union (AU) and signed. While numbers are heavily disputed and unclear, casualties from the conflict may include upwards half a million people dead (some sources claim a million) and more than a million displaced.

Ethiopia's exclusionary political system and its authoritarian and patrimonial politics, where power is vested in an individual, on the surface seems to have facilitated quite

a bit of Ethiopia's former development successes (that may themselves be questioned, at least for their sustainability and inclusivity), which saw the country assume the status of the fastest-growing economy in Africa in 2018, sometime before the war. Even so, TPLF's iron-fist rule has created a spiral of grievances that shape contemporary conflict lines, manifesting today between a pan-Ethiopianist political center and ethno-nationalist forces fighting for autonomy and political rights. Recent events also stress the nature of asymmetrical or electoral autocratisation: during the election in 2021, 97 percent of the seats in parliament were awarded to PP, with the party being the only eligible one for votes in many states.

Changes to Danish development cooperation

Since the opening of the Danish embassy in 2005, the bilateral relationship has gradually strengthened through high-level political dialogue, increased joint engagement in international issues, development cooperation, and enhanced commercial ties. The foundation for a broad and cohesive Danish engagement is cemented in the contrastful and paradoxical characteristics of Ethiopia. The Danish development engagement in Ethiopia has included, among other things, a country program for the period 2018-2022 (extended to 2024 because of the crises) with a total budget of approximately 1.1 billion DKK. The bilateral development cooperation has primarily focused on three areas: (1) combating climate change (2) enhancing commercialisation and economic opportunities in the agricultural sector, and (3) good governance, strengthened protection of rights and civil society participation. Programmatically, support to resilience of the poorest part of Ethiopian society through the Ethiopian social safety net programmes were a major component of the bilateral portfolio.

However, armed violence has continuously challenged international development cooperation in the country. In 2020, the EU suspended nearly 670 million DKK in direct budget support aid to Ethiopia because of the internal conflict in the country's Tigray region, as well as halted the ratification of a new EU development programme in the country.

August 2021 marked the onset of escalating conflict in the region, and in November 2021 (in effect early January 2022), the Danish embassy further incited Danish citizens to leave the country, also effectuating a downscaling at the embassy to 'essential' staff, with 'non-essential' staff and families being asked to leave the country. However, the situation didn't deteriorate further and staff returned after two months.

The postponement of the election in 2020 due to COVID-19 and issues with the central government likely triggered the initial tensions. The major escalation caught most off guard, as tensions between authorities and the TPLF were followed but not considered at the low point they would prove to be. When two central cities fell over a weekend, many development partners shifted the focus to consular affairs, coordinating with partners to amend travel advisories. Reliance on various sources of intelligence, including social media and satellite imagery, was crucial, just as informal networks were utilized for information gathering.

After a period of deliberation between development partners and between embassies and headquarters, all funding to the government was halted, including direct collaborations and UN projects, awaiting clarity on the government's direction. Capacity-building initiatives with authorities were also suspended, and contingency plans were drafted in case embassy closure was necessary. This led to changes in the part of Danish aid that involved direct collaboration with Ethiopian authorities to ensure that Danish development aid continued to be used only for the intended purposes. This included Denmark's support to agriculture and forestry programs. Sometime after the initial reallocations, efforts were made to explore whether collaboration on water could be strengthened with utility companies or local governments instead of ministries and agencies. As the crisis eventually spread, diverting funds to other regions was not considered feasible. In the case of agriculture and forestry programming (that included direct government collaboration), Denmark decided to provide reimbursement (i.e. a form of payment-by-results) rather than advanced payments to partners until 2023 where a process of normalization began. Danish efforts were also made to support and strengthen financial control mechanisms at all its partners, including the UN.

Overall, collaboration with the Ethiopian government posed central challenges to Danish development cooperation, especially concerning uncertainties around the adherence to human rights. However, due to Ethiopia's strategic importance, as well as a concern around upholding much-needed support to the Ethiopian population, complete disengagement was not considered a viable option, and while navigating these complexities, ensuring continuity in support remained paramount. A more prolonged commitment to supporting local populations was deemed necessary, while maintaining a difficult balance between programmatic and strategic flexibility and upholding shared principles in alignment with the overall EU approach. Despite the absence of a clear modality for collaboration with the government, ensuring stability in the country remained a priority. By ensuring a wide variety of partners, Denmark tried to outsource risks of supporting or collaborating with the Ethiopian

government directly. For example, Denmark partnered with UNICEF to implement a water sector program instead of engaging directly with the government. Compared to other countries reviewed here, redirecting aid towards civil society was not deemed a primary option because of the pressure to Ethiopian CSOs and their shrinking space for engagement. Along the way, and aided by the more incremental nature of developments, staff from Copenhagen collaborated with the embassy in Ethiopia in assessing how to manage the increasingly dire circumstances.

MALI

After decades of improvements in Malian democratic institutions in its transition from authoritarian rule, a military coup in 2012 and unrest in the northern region of Mali brought the state's fragility into the light. Despite the Algiers Peace Agreement from 2015 meant to end hostilities between the Malian government and opposing rebel forces, continued political tensions and escalating conflict resulted in two military coups in 2020 and 2021 marking a step away from the country's promising democratic potential and towards closed autocracy. The 2020 military coup conducted by members of the Malian Armed Forces and led by Colonel Assimi Goïta saw the resignation of the president, President Ibrahim Boubacar Keïta, and parliament dissolved. The military junta announced the establishment of the National Committee for the Salvation of the People (CNSP) with the promise of elections held within a relatively short timeframe. Nationally, the coup led to very little violence or opposition. Leading up to the coup, mass demonstrations against the president had taken place weeks on end.

Internationally, however, the coup was met with condemnation and sanctions by the AU and the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and expressions of concern for the civilian population by West African leaders. The CNSP officially dissolved in January 2021. In May 2021 – just 9 months after the 2020 coup – a second military coup was conducted, again led by Colonel Assimi Goïta. The coup came after tension had grown between civilian politicians and the CNSP-inserted politicians, and unrest had spread in response to the kidnapping of opposition leader Soumaila Cissé. The military coup saw President Bah N'daw and Prime Minister Moctar Ouane stripped of their powers and the military junta promised new elections to be held in 2022, while a local transition follow-up committee composed of representatives of ECOWAS, the AU, and MINUSMA was created.

Though there have been opportunities for the population and parties to be included in consultative processes, many political and legislative decisions by the military-led

government, such as the appointment of central officials, have been conducted without broader public consultation. This comes with reports of arrest and torture of critics of the transitional government by the authorities. In June 2022, the interim President Goïta signed a decree prolonging the military rule, effectively delaying the transition to democracy another two years. The government further issued a new electoral law allowing members of the military junta to run in future elections and renewed the country's constitutions. July 2023 marked the adoption of a new Malian constitution, which the government argues is an important step towards restoring democracy and civilian rule as well as play a key role in stopping the spread of the 11-year jihadist insurgency. Though the new constitution was approved by referendum, it sparked debate and controversy due to its implications for advanced presidential powers and the amnesty granted to coup perpetrators. It entails a further empowerment of the military government and the current president, amongst other things granting him the power to dissolve parliament. Particularly, opposition figures express concerns about the constitution's drafting process and the need for a more inclusive approach to governance pointing to the fact that the draft constitution was not made public when it was submitted to military officials. Members of the Malian opposition movement have said the referendum was characterized by 'numerous irregularities' and 'violations of the law'. Yet, their legal case to have the results annulled was rejected by the constitutional court.

Corruption and lack of transparency in governance remains a key issue in Mali. There are laws in place to ensure public access to governmental operations and affairs, however, those attempting to obtain the information are often met with exceptions and a variety of obstacles, especially when it comes to information on military expenditure. As of March 2023, Mali remains on the Financial Action Task Force on Money Laundering grey list of countries under increased monitoring. After the coup in 2020, the CNSP cracked down on suspected corrupt government officials, but these efforts were blocked from making it to the military. More recently, in July 2022, international arrest warrants were issued for several former government officials, including former prime minister Cissé, read as an attempt to prevent him from running in the 2024 presidential election. The presidential election, which was scheduled for February 2024, was postponed by September 2023. Authorities cited 'technical reasons', as they were in the process of reviewing election data and addressing a new constitutional provision that would delay the second round of the vote.

Besides international condemnation for the two coups over the past few years, Mali has faced intensifying diplomatic crises. The regional spill-over effect from the

broader Maghreb-Sahara-Sahel region significantly worsened the country's crisis. Vast territories, limited border control, and weak state institutions has created a myriad of challenges in the region including irregular migration, increasing poverty levels, and low levels of employment, especially for the youth. The United Nations Security Council (UNSC), has emphasized Mali as a global peace and security threat repeatedly since 2012. At the request of the Malian government, the UNSC voted to end a decade-long peacekeeping mission in Mali, the UN Multidimensional Integrated Mission in Mali, by January 2024. The relationship between Mali and France has also been straining over recent years. In 2022, Emanuel Macron announced the decision to withdraw French troops and end 9 years of French military presence in Mali, pushed by anti-French and anti-colonial sentiments. At the same time, the links between Mali and Russia have strengthened, amongst other things resulting in the deployment of mercenaries from the Wagner group (recently regrouped as the Africa Corps) in the country. The presence of Russian mercenaries in Mali has drawn strong condemnation from the international community, yet both the Malian and Russian government insist on their presence as merely training and facilitating the combating of rebel groups. In 2022, the US decided to order the departure of its non-essential diplomatic personnel from Bamako because of the increasing risk of terrorist attacks. Throughout 2022 and 2023, Islamic State in the Greater Sahara (EIGS) made significant gains in occupying territory, especially in southeast Mali. EIGS is clashing with the Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims (GSIM, or JNIM according to the Arabic acronym), linked to Al-Qaeda, both wanting to control supply routes, increase territory under their control, and cement their influence in the region, while an Alliance of the Sahel States (AES) was formed in November 2023 by Burkina Faso, Mali, and Niger, as a response to the threat from ECOWAS of military intervention.

Poor governance, economic decline, youth unemployment, and corruption has affected the humanitarian situation in Mali, which is already dire as a result of food scarcities, climate change, and politically motivated economic sanctions. In 2022, the total of internally displaced people rose to more than 400,000 people. Climate change and droughts further complicate the situation with poor infrastructure unable to assist the large population groups struggling to adapt to reduced arable land and water scarcity. Extrajudicial killings, forced disappearances, and arbitrary arrests are known human rights violations by Malian military personnel, and counterterrorism operations have on several occasions led to unlawful killings of civilians, as seen in the Mopti and Ségou regions. Human Rights Watch reported that in March 2022, Malian security forces in support of the military government executed over 300 men in central Mali. UN human rights investigators were denied access to

the locations of the violations, and the Malian government itself has made little progress in its investigations. The widespread violence is threatening 'the very survival of the state', according to the United Nation expert on human rights in the country.

Schools have been closed due to rising insecurity in areas affected by conflict and in jihadist-held areas, curriculums have been changed to reflect their ideologies. The Malian media environment was fairly open prior to the recent military coups, but since then, freedom of expression and media freedom in Mali have been widely restricted. A shrinking civic space is particularly evident in areas controlled by anti-government militant groups. Civil society groups have also been limited by a 2022 ban imposed by the government on all NGOs that received French funding, which amounts to hundreds of organizations across Mali.

Changes to Danish development cooperation

Recent Danish development cooperation in and with Mali has centered on military and stabilization support, development aid and humanitarian assistance with main areas of support including private sector development, water and sanitation, peaceful reconciliation, and good governance. However, the military coups have challenged the setting for Denmark's engagement. In the months leading up to 2022, a new strategic framework for Denmark's engagement in Mali and a new bilateral country program for the period 2023-27 had been taking shape. The strategic framework had been under consultation with strategic partners and was planned to be completed in May 2022, while the country program was supposed to be completed by the end of 2022. An amount of 1.3 billion DKK had been allocated for the following country program. However, in the beginning of 2022 the transitional government of Mali expressed its ambition to extend the transitional period with five years. The increasingly autocratic tendencies had created tensions with the international community, reaching a peak when it was announced that Danish forces for the anti-terror operation Task Force Takuba were no longer welcome in the country. Increased instability meant the Danish Minister for Development Cooperation pushed for adapting Danish development involvement in the country to signal that Denmark would not accept the actions of the transitional government. The decision to adapt Danish development engagements also came with a postponement of the planned strategic framework and country program.

The engagement was adjusted so that planned activities carried out in collaboration with the Malian central government were put on hold. The planned activities suspended amounted to 41 million DKK in 2022 and involved four activities through

the country program: 1) a partnership agreement with the Malian Ministry of the Interior, 2) co-financing of a project with the Ministry of Agriculture, 3) support for an EU project on the establishment of secure zones for development, and 4) business climate projects aimed at the central government. Furthermore, the disbursement of funds for a new water sector program was put on hold. Overall, staff assessed that the adaptation of the selected development engagements could be put on hold without significant disruption to existing activities but would send a clear political signal to the regime. Mali, in addition to the political crisis, continued to undergo humanitarian, security, poverty, and climate-related crises. Therefore, other efforts to support the Malian population continued. However, from both a reputational and operational perspective, the Danish presence in the region was questioned. The lack of security for embassy personnel raised doubts regarding the level of influence they could effectively wield within the country. Further course of action was awaited from the Malian transitional government, including whether a credible and acceptable plan for a return to the democratic transition would emerge.

In 2023, the Danish engagement was again readjusted. The decision came at the backdrop of an analysis from December 2022, which found that the current political and security situation as well as expected developments over the coming year or two placed Mali in a critical scenario. International cooperation with Mali was challenged by its close alliance with Russia and the Wagner Group. The deteriorating security situation saw an escalation of the humanitarian crisis with the number of displaced persons continuously increasing. At the same time, there was widespread uncertainty around whether the democratic transition in 2024 would be implemented. The adjustments made in 2023 to the development and humanitarian cooperation with Mali included the decision to not resume activities that had been partially suspended since 2022. The continuation of five projects including Denmark's major private sector fund and civil society fund was allocated 96 million DKK in 2023 alongside projects with the UN and international NGOs. To ensure proper program closure of the country program of 2017-2022, the projects that did not involve collaboration with the central government were continued until their planned expiration in the period 2023-2026. In addition to humanitarian efforts, there was a focus on supporting civil society, the private sector, and directing contributions through multilateral partners, while also exploring opportunities of collaboration with local authorities in delivering services to the Malian population. The presence of the Danish embassy in Mali was maintained in order to support political dialogue, seize opportunities for influence, manage the development activities that continued and, ultimately, resume cooperation if the situation was to change.

The Transition Framework for Denmark's engagements in Mali 2024-2027 establishes the movement away from direct government support to government collaboration. The framework includes three strategic objectives: 1) contribute to stability, inclusive peacebuilding and a strengthened civil society, which builds on the learnings from FAMOC, the fund mechanism supporting drivers of change across various parts of Malian civil society, 2) promote socioeconomic and inclusive development, which builds on FACEJ, the successfully implemented fund to support youth entrepreneurs, and 3) strengthen locally-led and conflict sensitive climate adaptation, food security and resilience through the ongoing Mali Sustainable Urban Water Program. The decision to anchor Denmark's bilateral engagement in a transition framework instead of a strategic framework and a country program was driven by the wish to remain engaged despite inability to work through or with the national authorities. Central changes to implementation modalities were reflected in the reduction in timeframe and number of projects, with the framework now covering a shorter period than the traditional five-year period for strategic country frameworks and country programmes. Considering the unstable situation, it adopted a risk sensitive and flexible approach, requiring close monitoring of the security situation. This allows for continuous assessment of projects and initiatives and provides the opportunity for modifications to modalities in the case of worsening security conditions. It also includes an annual review of engagements in regard to expected outcomes, lessons learned for future engagements, and possible adjustments to the program.

At present, armed conflicts and the increasing presence of terror-affiliated groups entails considerable risks to engaging in Mali. Reflections on regional security have been central to the considerations around development cooperation. The security situation in Mali continues to have consequences for other countries in the Sahel and spill over into West African coastal countries. The EU and its member states broadly seems to agree that it should demonstrate strategic patience and maintain a presence in Mali to sustain a level of engagement and political dialogue. On Danish stabilization efforts, the regional Peace and Stabilisation Program for the Sahel phase II was extended to June 2024, with plans for phase III put on hold. Efforts will now focus on adapting the new phase to include West African coastal states affected by terrorism, with pilot projects in the Sahel and coastal countries informing the formulation of phase III, scheduled to begin in early 2025 while future interventions in Mali and Burkina Faso will adjust to political and security constraints, including the current lack of cooperation with defense and security forces.

The adjustments to Danish development engagements with Mali draws upon several strategic and programmatic considerations. To navigate these, there has been a

significant reliance on the approach taken by the EU and its member states, particularly given the challenging political and security landscape in Mali. This included aligning with the EU and other likeminded donors' decision to suspend cooperation with the central government and defense and security forces, reflecting a coordinated response among EU countries. There was also an effort to seek insights from the experiences and responses of Danish embassies neighboring countries, notably Burkina Faso, to inform its approach (embassies that conversely point to Mali as a regular litmus test for where regimes in the region would move next). With the security situation in Mali potentially worsening there is an inherent risk that the adapted engagement may be suspended, and the reduced Danish presence terminated altogether. However, such a termination would run the risk of ceding space to other actors who places less emphasis on the need for a democratic transition. Therefore, the changes made to Danish development cooperation has focused on the continuation of support for the civilian population and humanitarian assistance, as well as perceived presentation of an alternative to cooperation with Russia. Throughout the adjustments to Danish development cooperation in Mali, the Danish embassy engaged in ongoing, informal dialogues with headquarters in Copenhagen to assess risks associated with the continued engagements. These discussions allowed for the formulation of flexible, long-term plans outlined in the Transition Framework, considering factors such as the extent of commitment to engagement and ongoing assessment criteria. As the framework emphasizes, the changes of implementation modality present in the transition framework, notably scope of time and number of projects, comes with more modest expectations for impact. Yet, as the framework stakes out, 'exerting strategic patience through continued engagement to the benefit of the Malian people, providing viable alternatives, is an opportunity that should not be missed'.

MYANMAR

In 2021, a military coup put an abrupt end to years of progress towards democracy after five decades of military rule in Myanmar. February 1st, 2021, should have marked the convening of Myanmar's newly elected parliament after the 2020 elections, where Aung San Suu Kyi and her political party, the National League for Democracy, won a landslide victory. However, the Myanmar military, Tatmadaw, seized control of the country claiming widespread election fraud. Min Aung Hlaing, the commander-in-chief of the country's armed forces, declared a year-long state of emergency under military leadership. The state of emergency has since been extended four times granting the military legislative and judicial powers as well as

continuous control of the governing council. On the day of the coup, troops arrested president Win Myint, elected leader Aung San Suu Kyi, and placed them under house arrest. Since then, a series of politically motivated prosecutions have resulted in the conviction of both Win Myint and Aung San Suu Kyi on charges ranging from corruption to noncompliance with COVID-19 restrictions. In February 2022, a military court (based on highly dubious accusations) found Suu Kyi guilty on all charges, resulting in a 33-year prison sentence. Peaceful pro-democracy protests have from day one been met by repression and intimidation by the military and police.

The Civil Disobedience Movement, a nonviolent protest movement initiated by government workers, civil servants, and professionals in response to the military coup, gained momentum shortly after the coup and has played a significant role in opposing the military's control. Members of the movement have initiated strikes and engaged in symbolic acts of resistance, including displaying the three-finger salute, a symbol associated with the pro-democracy movement. Countermeasures were set in motion by the junta leaders in response to increasing protest movements including the violent use of forces, torture, arrests of protesters, and internet- and media blackouts. Resistance groups like the Local Defense Forces and People's Defense Forces have continuously launched attacks against political, military and police targets. Ethnic armed organizations (EAOs), that have been engaged in long-standing armed conflicts with the Tatmadaw prior to the coup, have added military strength to the opposition by forming alliances with pro-democracy forces and providing support to those opposing the military junta. The motivations and aims of these groups are highly diverse, however, and several of them have chosen not to actively take part in the resistance. It is unclear when Myanmar will hold its first election since the coup. The Tatmadaw postponed the scheduled election for 2023 until at least 2025 citing violence as the main reason of the postponement. As such, the junta continues to extend its state of emergency and constitute legislative obstacles for its opposition to mobilize effectively.

The military coup has unleashed an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in the country that is now fifth on the International Red Cross's Emergency Watchlist. The Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) identifies Myanmar among the most violent wars it tracks globally, with an estimated death toll of at least 50,000 since the 2021 military coup, including at least 8,000 civilians. However, this number is expected to be much higher as many killings go unreported. Human rights organizations have on several occasions called out the junta's 'widespread and systematic abuses'. As a result of two years of political instability, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that around half of the population is

now living in extreme poverty. In 2022, displacement reached record levels with almost 1.2 million people having fled their homes since the military coup in 2021. Food insecurity is also on the rise, as movement restrictions are hindering food production and inflation is impacting the ability of ordinary people to purchase necessities. At the same time, there are ongoing fighting across the country including the burning of homes, attacks on civilians, and aerial bombardment. Humanitarian assistance is heavily constrained in Myanmar. The detention and arrests of humanitarian actors are part of wide-ranging restrictions on the delivery of aid and access to people in need.

Changes to Danish development cooperation

Myanmar presents an intriguing case due to its intricate incremental and sudden autocratic developments. Since 2010-2011, Myanmar has been included in the list of priority countries for Danish development cooperation. Denmark initially aimed to support Myanmar's reform process by stepping up its engagement in the country and actively collaborating with its government with the establishment of an embassy in 2014 and the subsequent implementation of a country program. Indeed, 2011 to 2021 saw multiple social and economic reforms introduced by the government, with a strong window of democratic improvement not least from 2015 to 2017. Attempts were made to challenge the military's privileges and general power in the country, despite an authoritarian constitution. However, a solidified authoritarian structure persisted throughout the democratic years. While critical voices amongst EU Member States perceived the pace of reforms to be too slow, insiders from the Myanmar government argued that speeding up the process would provoke resistance. The rationale was, therefore, to maintain a delicate balance between civilian and military interests to maintain the relative democratization, characterized by advancements in press freedom, educational opportunity, and civic space.

From 2016-2020, Denmark's Myanmar country program encompassed bilateral commitments totaling 470 million DKK under the overarching vision of contributing to the country's development into a peaceful and more democratic society with fair, sustainable, and inclusive growth. However, in 2017, armed violence against the Rohingya Muslim minority group broke out in Myanmar's Rakhine State, forcing more than 700,000 people to seek refuge in Bangladesh. The Rohingya crisis serves as a pivotal moment, initiating a gradual process of autocratisation. In 2019, Denmark allocated 100 million DKK in humanitarian aid for the Rohingya. Internationally, Aung San faced criticism for refraining from confronting the military, despite her lack of direct involvement in the Rohingya crisis, and countries, including Denmark, began to distance themselves from the government.

The military coup in 2021 abruptly halted the country's positive trajectory and led to massive popular resistance. The military had established a constitution in 2008 that granted them 25 percent of the seats in parliament, making any amendments to the constitution impossible without their approval, just as they held significant ministerial positions. Despite Aung San's position as the de facto prime minister, she lacked control over the police, security forces, and the constitution effectively restrained her authority. While these dynamics were understood, there was a widespread understanding that the military would not stage a coup as long as they held considerable power. Prior to the election, it was believed that the Danish representatives, alongside the EU, had plans to restart dialogue with Aung San's government. In 2020 alone, the Danish government granted 23 million DKK to the Myanmar government. However, this support came to an end with the military coup, as Denmark discontinued all development aid the day following the coup. All development assistance that previously went through government partners was immediately redirected to support local civil society organizations working to promote human rights, protection, and democracy. Grounded in decentralization competencies, the Danish embassy determined which CSOs should receive funding. Indeed, Denmark has facilitated a significant CSO network in Myanmar, including through Danish organizations, with whom collaboration was either strengthened or established anew. The Danish embassy was in charge of coordination with the CSOs and frequently discussed possibilities for collaboration with them.

Despite difficulty in connection to other development partners and facilitating a collective response, it was quickly agreed amongst likeminded that halting assistance was the most effective political signal to send. A few weeks after the coup, EU started convening meetings, yet it did not immediately cease assistance to the government. Presently, Myanmar has endured sanctions for an extended period, yet it continues to find avenues to circumvent them effectively. These sanctions, however, do not seem to have significantly influenced the political landscape in terms of engagement with the military junta.

Generally, the political reaction from Denmark, including at the ministerial level where the decision to suspend aid fell well in line with the past government's focus on a value-based foreign policy, was swift. It provided a clear political stance that outlined Danish intentions and approaches. Since, however, embassy staff have considered whether the rather critical stance towards Aung San and her government, heavily influenced by the Rohingya crisis, was beneficial, or whether Denmark inadvertently distanced itself from her, which proved to be imprudent. Another pivotal element in the adjustments made to Danish development cooperation was

the level of autonomy granted to (or taken by) Danish representatives in Myanmar to make strategic and operational decisions, with minimal interference from Copenhagen, as well as the crucial importance of maintaining close contact with NGOs who provided invaluable intelligence central to assembling a comprehensive understanding of the situation as it unfolded after the coup.

SYRIA

March 2011 marked the beginning of large-scale public demonstrations in the Syrian Arab Republic. The Syrian population had witnessed the uprisings of the Arab Spring, and public discontent with President Bashar al-Assad, who succeeded his father, Hafez, after he died in 2000, had been building up. With the arrest of a group of teenage boys for anti-government graffiti, pro-democracy rallies and student-led demonstrations against the Ba'athist government formed across the country. The government's violent crackdown on demonstrators, including the use of deadly force, resulted in a country-wide demand for the president to resign. Later known as the Syrian Revolution, intense escalations of the conflict in 2012 resulted in Syria descending into a complex civil war, still ongoing today. From the outset, the rebellion was motivated by the Syrian population's dissatisfaction with national political and socioeconomic conditions under Assad's rule. A decade later it is characterized by a wide range of domestic and foreign forces that oppose one another as well as the Ba'athist government.

The opposition forces, mostly Sunni Arabs, agree on the removal of Assad as state leader of Syria, yet the groups envision varying constructions of post-war Syria. Islamic State (IS) has also long been actively involved in the civil war with the intent of cementing a sovereign state in the territory between Iraq and Syria. Foreign countries including Iran, the US, Russia, and Turkey have also engaged in the war through the provision of military and financial support. An international coalition led by the US, which was established in 2014 to counter IS, has conducted airstrikes both against IS targets and pro-Assad forces. Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah have supported the Assad regime militarily, and Turkey has launched attacks against the Syrian Democratic Forces, IS, as well as the government. As such, Syria became a proxy war with regional and international powers supporting various factions, often with conflicting interests. At this point, the myriad of actors involved have all been accused of human rights violations and the civilian suffering has been made evident on numerous occasions including attacks on hospitals, schools, and the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime.

The humanitarian crisis in Syria is characterized by the widespread suffering of the population due to violence, displacement, and the breakdown of essential services. Twelve years after the first protests, the war constitutes the second deadliest conflict in the 21st century with an estimated 500,000 deaths, and remains the world's largest refugee crisis. Today, more than 70 percent of the Syrian population - 15.3 million people - are in need of humanitarian assistance. This marks an all-time high since the beginning of the war. The conflict has forced over 12 million people out of their homes, including almost 6.8 million internally displaced and 5.4 million living as refugees in neighbouring countries. Territorial borders are under pressure, and already fragile political relations in the region are continuously challenged. Critical infrastructure and civilian housing have been destroyed and access to food and water have been restricted, with humanitarian organisations facing significant challenges in delivering aid within Syria due to the conflict's volatility and insecurity. Access to affected areas is often restricted, making it difficult to reach those in need. This has resulted in sporadic and uneven distribution of essential supplies, including food, clean water, and medical assistance. To add to the complexity of the crisis, the 2023 Turkey–Syria earthquakes, the COVID-19 pandemic, and a global food crisis, have all exacerbated the already dire humanitarian conditions. From 2011 and onwards, actors such as the EU, the US, and Australia have imposed economic sanctions on Syria impacting not only humanitarian efforts but the work of all Syrian partners. However, the recent earthquakes saw a growing call for lifting the sanctions against the country, with some humanitarian efforts blocked by the effects of the sanctions.

Changes to Danish development cooperation

Since 2011, Denmark has provided support to Syria and neighboring countries, particularly Jordan and Lebanon, with more than 3.5 billion DKK through three types of assistance: 1) humanitarian efforts, 2) development initiatives, and 3) stabilization efforts. From 2010-2015, humanitarian engagement was informed by Danida's Strategy for Danish Humanitarian Action 2010-2015, which largely focused on supporting refugees, internally displaced persons, and affected local communities. The strategic direction towards vulnerability became particular relevant to the response to the Syrian crisis in linking emergency and longer-term approaches. The humanitarian assistance was, at this point, mainly run out of Copenhagen. However, it was deemed necessary to be more actively engaged on the ground due to the extensive implementation efforts underway in Jordan and Lebanon. Consequently, a strategic decision was made to deploy a development advisor to the region.

As the humanitarian crisis grew, neighboring countries were pushing for long-term development beyond responses to immediate humanitarian needs. Consequently,

from 2012-2015, humanitarian funding was used flexibly to support longer-term assistance, amongst other things through the Regional Development and Protection Programme (RDPP). RDPP is a multi-donor European initiative aimed at supporting Syrian refugees and local host communities in Lebanon and Jordan, with the objective of enhancing conditions for more sustainable solutions for Syrian refugees. The program is supported by Denmark, the EU, Ireland, Switzerland, Austria, the Netherlands, and the Czech Republic. Denmark has led the implementation of RDPP since the program's inception in 2014. The strategic focus on long-term solutions builds on the general understanding that human-made crises are long-term crises. Indeed, during the refugee crisis in 2015 more than 1 million people, mostly from Syria, requested asylum in Europe. This prompted an additional 250 million DKK in humanitarian assistance to Syria and the neighboring countries, which was the highest since the start of the crisis in 2011. It also influenced the political attention within the EU, which saw an extension of the RDPP till June 2018.

A Danish evaluation of the RDPP from 2018 found that it is an effective modality for 'practical response to a protracted crisis in terms of providing for adequate foresight, flexibility and strategic gap filling', which has emphasized the value of a multi-donor approach and closer links between humanitarian and development efforts. It also pointed out that though RDPP is not designed with a focus on localization, the gradual alteration of the Lebanese and Jordanian refugee response and government policies towards more locally led projects has influenced the RDPP portfolio to include national NGOs to a larger extent. Today, the embassy in Beirut is handling a large portfolio in the region, consisting of a complex partner structure.

Overall, the prolonged nature of the crisis in Syria has resulted in an increasing focus on providing sustainable assistance, with a particular emphasis on bolstering protection, fostering greater resilience and self-reliance, and enhancing access to basic services. This is also reflected in the Danish contribution of 600 million DKK to development efforts in and around Syria for the period 2021-2023. The strategic focus of the RDPP's long-term solutions has and still provides a great degree of flexibility. The current and third phase of the program commenced in 2023 and will continue until 2026, with a total budget of 335-372 million DKK. The programming has undergone significant changes over time, adopting a notably leaner approach to program administration, which aligns with a heightened emphasis on localisation. These shifts occur within the broader framework of coalition structures, particularly concerning the general approach to refugee assistance. The lack of a particular strategy for the Syrian crisis has resulted in disparate developments across various tracks without sufficient coordination or alignment while efforts in Lebanon and

Jordan have seen comparatively greater coordination. This also leaves the sustainability of the projects and programs at risk when political attention is directed elsewhere. Though frameworks for humanitarian support are in place, challenges persist in reaching consensus on the overall political stance, especially in contexts like Syria where governmental control is fragmented.

UGANDA

Yoweri Museveni's near 40-year rule of Uganda has seen the country go through incremental autocratisation, with few ruptures yet a steady pace of building authoritarianism. After the civil war lasting until 1994, the first elections of Museveni's time in office were conducted in 1996. Subsequent Ugandan elections of Museveni have been criticized or accused of involving fraud, voter suppression, or inciting civil unrest, as well as detainment of opposition leaders, and have been disputed by international observers. Already in 2001 had Museveni proclaimed that he contested for the last time, yet leading up to the 2006 election, his allies executed a campaign to amend the constitution's two-term limit, prompting several European countries to announce symbolic aid cuts in July 2005. This in turn led Museveni to lift an existing restriction on certain activities of political parties, before November that year saw the detainment of opposition leader Kizza Besigye.

The mid-2000s also saw the government reintroducing multiparty politics to Uganda, which some interpreted as a means to withhold power and avoid attention to other restrictive constitutional amendments. Though the current legislation allows for the creation of political parties, they are restricted through a variety of legal and non-legal manners. Freedom House reports that the National Resistance Movement (NRM) 'retains power through the manipulation of state resources, intimidation by security forces, and politicized prosecutions of opposition leaders'. Museveni's reign was further cemented in 2017 with the elimination of the presidential age limit of 75. Despite critics voicing concerns over procedural challenges and intimidation in relation to the removal of the presidential age limit, the Supreme Court sustained the decision in 2019.

The integrity of the electoral system and administration by the Electoral Commission (EC) in Uganda has received dispersed international criticism, as have government-actions surrounding elections during the past decades. In the 2016 election, access to social media was blocked for a week by the government (as it was again in 2021, drawing criticism in both instances from Amnesty International and others). The

NRM cited concerns over national security and the prevention of the spreading of 'lies' as their main incentives. In 2018, the government implemented a controversial social media tax limiting opposition communication and mobilization. The allegations of election fraud, internet shutdowns, and political repression leading up to the 2021 election align with previous reports of election-related issues in Uganda. Authorities ordered internet service providers to block access to social media and issued a country-wide internet shutdown for five days during the election. Election observations took place from IGAD and the EAC, while the EU chose to undertake an 'Election watch' performed by diplomats from embassies present. Several civil society representatives and a few diplomatic representatives never received a response to their election accreditation but were not outright denied access. Local civil society organizations were not allowed to form an official election observation coalition but were allowed to undertake observation individually.

The EC declared Museveni the winner of the election, which saw an additional extension of his 35-year rule. In November 2020, before the election in January 2021, Museveni's main opponent, current leader of the National Unity Platform (NUP) Robert Kyagulanyi Ssentamu, known as Bobi Wine, was placed under a two-day house arrest. This sparked nationwide protests amongst opposition supporters, who were met by violent repression by the security forces killing more than 50 protesters. In the run-up to the election, NUP alleges that hundreds of their supporters were abducted, tortured, and some killed.

The humanitarian situation in Uganda is characterized by national political instability, high levels of corruption, human rights violations, regional insecurity resulting in displacement and rising inequalities amongst the population. Though Uganda has made significant improvements cutting the share of the population living below the poverty line by half from 1993-2013, one third still live in extreme poverty today. The northern part of the country is particularly stricken by high poverty rates and a lack of employment opportunity. Restrictions on NGOs and civil society organisations have long been reported in Uganda, affecting their ability to operate freely, yet with more room for maneuvering than e.g. in neighboring Rwanda. At a time where civil society is dependent on foreign funding, Museveni's government introduced legislation both in 2009 and 2016 restricting the operations of NGOs in the country, including limitations on their ability to receive foreign funding.

Despite these challenges, Uganda remains a 'model example' for its approach to refugees. Even while hosting the largest number of refugees in Africa, not least from DRC and South Sudan, Uganda is recognized for its progressive policy that sees

refugees receive *prima facie* refugee status, allowing them access to health and education, as well as right to movement and work.

During Museveni's rule, Uganda has experienced gross human rights violations. LGBT+ persons have long faced persecution and stigmatization with both male and female homosexuality being illegal, and same-sex marriage constitutionally banned in 2005. In 2009, the first anti homosexuality bill was introduced by an MP, causing widespread reactions in the international community and leading several development partners to halt or reprogram aid. Museveni, however, defended the act and accused Western powers of meddling in internal Uganda affairs, and it was passed in Parliament later in 2014. Six months later, the act was ruled invalid by the Constitutional Court and annulled. The act would have extended the illegality of same-sex relations to the domestic sphere with punishments all the way up to life imprisonment, extended the penal code, and even if revoked, Human Rights Watch have found it led to increase in arbitrary arrests, police abuse, extortion, loss of employment, discriminatory evictions by landlords, and reduced access to health services because of their perceived sexual orientation or gender identity (Human Rights Watch, 2014). In 2023, another bill was passed with some of the world's toughest anti-LGBT legal consequences, including the death penalty for 'aggravated homosexuality' (that makes direct reference to disability as an aggravating factor), and punishment for new crimes such as 'promotion of homosexuality' that makes it illegal for organizations or companies to advocate for the rights of LGBT+ people. Historically, legislative repercussions for LGBT+ person draw lines to the British colonial rulers, who were the first to introduce laws in Uganda punishing homosexuality, just as the legislation both in 2009 and 2023 is believed to have been backed and pushed by American evangelical organizations.

Uganda is recognized as a hybrid state (Diamond, 2015) in that occasionally functioning democratic institutions and practices are used to further cement the central authoritarian control of Museveni. That is, elections are held even if they are not fair and free. The press is relatively free and can operate, but only under conditions evoked by the President. The police and similar security-enforcing institutions exist and are formally bureaucratized, yet they are rarely responsive to citizens' needs – they exercise violence rationalized and legitimized within the law as opposed to forms of exceptional violence. Oppositional figures may be detained on false accusations and the High Court besieged during the court case of such figures, yet they are released as soon as the high court deems the detainments illegitimate, the power and legitimacy of certain state institutions quickly fluctuating over time. Territorially, the state is newer fully present, but it is not absent either.

Museveni's authoritarianism has been described as governed by a form of institutionalized arbitrariness (Tapscott, 2021). That is a state producing a self-policing population that may want to subvert or challenge the state on occasion but where pervasive uncertainty dilutes any attempts to do so. In other words, the persistent possibility that formal state institutions may actually function as one would expect them to mean that people continually engage with them, even if they are corrupted or fraught with authoritarian characteristics. The projection of authoritarian power over population and territory through unpredictability and uncertainty makes it difficult for citizens to know what to expect and thus how to react in interactions with state institutions. The fragmented governance environment can be exemplified by a 2017 government report finding that funding for agricultural inputs were spread out among 17 ministries, departments and agencies (Tapscott, 2021).

Recent years have seen a narrowing of the rights to freedom of expression and association, privacy, equality, and non-discrimination, with infringements on media and the press, and party, government, and state becoming more and more synonymous. State surveillance of citizens has increased through a sprawling security apparatus that includes secret operatives at all levels and surveillance through locally elected bodies and representatives but also more digitally sophisticated tools of spyware- and malware-use to spy on politicians, journalists and citizens (Privacy International, 2016). While we have seen a steady increase in women's participation in Ugandan politics (as well a policy framework on gender equality), some have argued that this has mainly been used as an instrument for the ruling party to maintain dominant vote share in light of openings towards multipartyism (Tripp, 2023). And while concentration of power along ethnic lines grows, questions are outstanding on the matter of eventual transition. It is unclear whether such transition will go to the party (minister next in line in case of the president's death, resignation, or removal) or to Museveni's son Muhoozi, who have recently seen criticism after proclaiming public support for both TPLF in Ethiopia and for Vladimir Putin in what was a growing involvement in foreign affairs before Museveni was forced to order all Ugandan army commanders to refrain from commenting on social media.

There is growing concern that the country is moving from a state of hybridity towards a purer form of incremental authoritarianism. This sensation has grown particularly since the 2021 post-election violence that saw more than fifty people killed during protests after the arrest of oppositional candidate Bobi Wine, and contemplated numbers that more than a thousand people were kidnapped, many of them

members of Wine's National Unity Party. Through patronage and significant increases in military and security spending, potential threats of violence become undecipherable and extra-judicial killings may take place, obfuscating norms and accountability. Tightening of political space and high degrees of uncertainty avoids any ordered arrangements that may become sufficiently powerful and challenge the president, altogether incapacitating any potential for political or civil oppositionality.

Changes to Danish development cooperation

Uganda has been a priority country for Danish development assistance for decades. Amongst other things, Denmark has led donor coordination within initiatives on governance and democracy through its long-term hosting of the Democratic Governance Facility (DGF), a joint donor engagement established by eight development partners under an agreement with the government of Uganda. Moreover, Denmark has supported stabilisation and resilience efforts in Uganda to strengthen the resilience of the country and to support its stabilising role in the region. However, the corruption scandal in 2012, where over 89 million DKK in aid was found defrauded from the Office of the Prime Minister found Denmark instantly suspending aid alongside other donors who had been affected. A year later, in 2014, development partners responded to the introduction of an Anti-Homosexuality Act, which was later struck down nationally, by cutting 682 million DKK in foreign aid. Then Minister for Trade and Development Cooperation Mogens Jensen decided to reallocate 50 million DKK of development engagement in cooperation with governmental authorities to civil society and private sector projects. However, support for a water sector program and infrastructure projects through the Ugandan authorities was maintained to support the local population. This also came with the decision that future Danish development engagements should be executed without direct funding of government authorities, maintaining avenues for dialogue and strategic partnerships.

In 2021, violence and suppression of the political opposition leading up to the election once again led development partners to revisit their engagements. In turn, Museveni decided to suspend the DGF citing that the funds were 'used to finance activities and organizations designed to subvert [the] Government under the guise of improving governance'. An important factor contributing to the suspension was the spread of misinformation around the DGF at the time including to the government. Interestingly, countries engaged in the DGF had just adopted an approach that promised effective and sustainable delivery of aid in contentious environments (Vandeputte, 2023). Development partners expressed their willingness to continue working with the government of Uganda and civil society, though the suspension

was a clear indication of the government's discontent and disapproval with the governance- and human rights NGOs in Uganda. In 2022 then, following continuous dialogue between the DGF development partners and the Ugandan Government, the DGF suspension was lifted. The initial timeline of the DGF program was maintained and the composition of the Board and the Steering Committee were amended to include representatives from government. During this time, the drafting of the Danish Uganda Strategic Framework (USF) and the new Uganda Bilateral Development Programme (UBDP) was ongoing. A modality review in 2021 focusing on the move from decentralised units found that the establishment of a Management Unit would be the most feasible modality option for a Democracy and Rights project in the new UBDP, when taking into consideration the political context and delegated partnership under the DGF.

When in 2023, Museveni signed into law the Anti-Homosexuality Act, there was broad agreement amid likeminded donors that diplomacy and critical dialogue with government were the most effective tools available. This included continued dialogue with central members of the government and authorities. In addition, support for the safety of people within the LGBT+ community was accentuated. At this point, Danish support to Ugandan state institutions was limited to two minor programs focusing on public financial management and capacity building of the public anti-corruption unit. Considerations were held regarding the funding for the bilateral development program with local and international LGBT+ organizations, as well as broader civil society, advising against cutting development aid to Uganda arguing that those impacted by such a change to the Danish engagement would be already vulnerable and marginalized individuals in Ugandan society. In the EU group, countries broadly agreed that cutting funds would be counterproductive, an opinion not least based on past experiences showcasing the disproportionate effect on local communities. Furthermore, the EU was trying to promote more equitable dialogue with partner countries which would not align with an immediate cutting of aid.

In 2023, the UBDP was launched with an extended timeline from 2023-2028 and a budget frame of DKK 650 million to 'strengthen regional and national stability and prosperity by supporting Uganda in achieving a green, sustainable and inclusive economic transformation, respecting human rights while continuing to host refugees from neighbouring countries'. By ensuring continuous adjustment of the engagements, the strategy not only outlines the Danish development engagement in Uganda but provides a clear framework for enhanced Danish climate policy dialogue and cooperation with Uganda. The bilateral development program consists of seven projects that are both continued partnerships and new projects: Trade Support

Project, agricultural business initiative (aBi), development, aBi finance, Strengthening Adolescent and Youth Empowerment and Rights (SAY), Africa Rural Climate Adaptation Finance Mechanism Uganda, Uganda Refugee Resilience Initiative (URRI), and Promotion of Accountability, Civic Engagement & Rights. (PACER). Pacer, a multi-donor program led by the Danish management unit, builds on lessons learned from the DGF.

Recent developments in Uganda with an increasingly shrinking civic and democratic space, challenges to press freedom, and power struggles with the political leadership also influences areas of Danish engagement. To navigate the complex political landscape in the country and the strained dialogue between donors and the government, Denmark and like-minded development partners focus on increasingly behind-the-scenes diplomacy to maintain a political dialogue.

However, Denmark continues to identify opportunities for positive dialogue with the government as well as non-state actors. To this day, few development partners are supporting the government directly because of concerns over corruption and do-no-harm principles. Indeed, reputational risk and risks of doing more harm than good have also been reflected in civil society discussion. Civil society leader Godber Tumushabe, in *The Washington Post*, described international donors as the 'biggest enablers of Museveni's authoritarianism' (Bearak, 2021). This has continuously raised questions amongst Danish representatives around accountability, the cost of aid, and efficiency.

Uganda is, in a study of responses to autocratisation, an interesting case because of its incremental nature. States simultaneously exhibiting characteristics of developed democracies and authoritarian regimes are highly complex to support or collaborate with. The ability to operate in the ambiguous space between authoritarianism and democracy makes Uganda a difficult political setting for development partners to act in. In more practical terms, representations are challenged by the institutional memory in diplomatic missions over time influenced by turnover of staff, diverging views and analyses, raising central questions and considerations to development engagement. On the relation between technical and political reform, it is difficult to know whether substantial donor investment in technical reform has an effect on the political conditions in the country. Similarly, it challenges a development partner's decision-making on where the red lines is between conditionality and community. Is it enough to mostly communicate the need for political or human rights reform without including it as conditionality for support? Often, assumptions that cutting aid will disrupt avenues and opportunities for influence, and potentially lead to a

deterioration of the situation, are central to the decision-making. Ambiguity means national developments that seem to be moving the country in the wrong direction may actually represent the opposite, facilitating in innate concern of being unable to grasp the true nature of certain situations. A foundational challenge to development engagements, therefore, is identifying the slow decline of conditions.

Decisions on possible collaborations with certain government institutions are further complicated by the complexity of governance structures in the country. For example, support to the justice-sector authorities would see funds flow to the police – a main perpetrator of violence and human rights violations. As a result of the pursuit of a hands-off policy, partnership structures become increasingly complex and multifaceted. A foundational reputational risk is also present in the backing of informal actors, which could find disapproval in the government. Copenhagen has long been heavily involved in the Danish response to LGBT+ issues, yet in other areas, the mission itself played a leading role in civil society work, with a vast network of contacts enabling it to advise Copenhagen on how to handle relevant developments and changes. Finally, considerations around humanitarian and development support circle the relation to other political agendas beyond the country itself.

KEY DISCUSSION POINTS AND CONCLUSION

In the current (geo)political context of democratic backsliding, Denmark will face an expanding collection of situations and countries of autocratisation with which we must engage. The cases explored in this paper show a diversity of ways to think about and respond to autocratisation, but they also stress similarities in challenges and the value of collecting lessons and experiences for the sake of learning. Learnings that shape how we collect intelligence and information, analyze local circumstances and developments, or respond to intensified processes of autocratisation, ruptures such as coups, or opposite trajectories of improvement that may be every bit as difficult to respond to in a timely and appropriate manner.

Throughout the discussion points and conclusions made below can be said to flow three key measures: strategic engagement, nuance, and trust. **Strategic engagement** because absolute decoupling never seems to be an appropriate response, no matter the circumstances, at all times requiring capacity and resources locally. Long term presence cannot be taken as a given or overestimated for the ways it provides access and dialogue, including to areas where one may not work or provide support, simply because of the temporality of engagement. The vast majority of man-made crises turn into protracted ones with immense human consequences, demanding an enduring but also strategic engagement that should not be fully disrupted through automatic responses to regime changes and the like but planned along longer lines of strategic focus within which adjustments may be made. **Nuance** because few of these situations are completely alike and require similar instruments, but also because their inherent complexities mean we cannot resort to rushed decisions that are black and white in their interpretations of whether, or where, or with what, we can remain present. And finally **trust** because efforts in these contexts require faith in

embassies and local staff, whose contextual knowledge and insights are defining for how to be engaged. The difficult circumstances mean staff are rarely able to rely on established modes of control, oversight, or bureaucratic ordering that one would usually depend on. In such situations, embassies and local staff must be the foundation for decisions made, if these are to produce any changes locally.

Integrative views to incremental autocratisation and ruptures. While the cases engaged here are fundamentally different, it quickly becomes clear that strict dividing lines between incremental processes of autocratisation and ruptures too easily results in deficient analyses. Countries and their authoritarian developments are inherently distinctive, yet all of the cases show well how ruptures in the form of coups never emerges from nothing. Instead, they draw on histories of governance, enmity, and societal dividing lines that show vulnerabilities towards different forms of autocratisation and lack of cohesion, stressing the need for an integrative view to autocratisation. Rarely were coups that ended up defining processes of autocratisation, foreseen or imagined before taking place. Rather, they took place under conditions of growing democratisation or in situations where small steps were taken to actually counter autocratisation, often because certain political or military factions saw their influence diminish. This speaks volume to oft-expressed sensations that coups were not seen to be around the corner as a given country was experiencing progressive circumstances and developments, and makes us see autocratic ruptures more so a risk in countries undergoing fragile democratisation, after periods of autocratisation, than countries worsening on a downwards trajectory.

Importance of construing an optimum portfolio. Responses to autocratisation fundamentally depends on the composition of portfolios in the given country – the collection of instruments, programmes and projects engaged that also benefits from the MFA's approach to being an 'enhedstjeneste' that combines both development and political levels. And adjustments away from efforts directly benefitting governments or working through public or otherwise state institutions is perhaps the most predominant move in situations of autocratisation. The cases show the importance of at least three concerns vis-à-vis portfolios: forecasting, diversification, and strong CSO-support. The first two are connected by how forecasting of future scenarios and developments often compels a portfolio of engagements that is diverse and able to handle a number of different outcomes and changes, most likely among which is the inability to work directly with the state. As we will return to, however, there is a need to not treat the state in unitary form (i.e. not seeing the state through a narrow lens in terms of what/who it constitutes and

whether it can be collaborated with or not), and most of the cases show ample room for providing support through local governance structures that are not necessarily directly connected to central ones. Across most cases further stand the importance of strong CSO collaboration, or clear weaknesses in its absence. Not only because CSOs are the most widely used recipients and vehicles of delivery and implementation in times of adjustments, but also because CSO networks are crucial in the event of a coup, where they are found to be defining in terms of gathering, analysing, and acting on intelligence upon which embassies may act and adapt. This includes not just international CSOs but local ones, direct support to whom has the potential to not create too complex and cumbersome partnership structures and strengthen localisation.

In assembling portfolios, the cases here speak volume to the importance of not seeing the state as a unitary actor or a totality that either dictates engagement or suspension. All states and their forms of governance, across levels, consists of collections of fragments and parts – islands – some of which may be impossible to work with and others that might make more than enough sense to engage. Assuming the state to be a singular entity, and thus having a position of either/or, means one will often miss the nuances and potentials that lies in engaging parts of the system. The cases show a need to be flexible in interpretations of what it means to ‘not support the government’, not least because there is possibility in most contexts to support local authorities without directly supporting the government writ large. But also, because supporting the state in some form provides a leverage that the cases show is more or less completely lost by disengaging – not a leverage for control or threats, but one for dialogue, information, and intelligence.

Political support and restraint. While many of the efforts engaged in here takes place below the political level of ministers and government-involvement on the Danish side, this level is key in structuring the response to autocratisation. Most of the cases revolve around decisions that over time still either require or end up involved approval or intervention by relevant Danish ministers, sometimes because ministers actively wish to make decisions around engagements, talk to media, or engage in high-level political interactions, and sometimes because the volume and form of the adjustments in e.g. aid programming is of such a size that requires formal acceptance from the relevant minister. Especially questions around decoupling can be difficult to manage and may lead to disagreements between embassies and minister, who see the individual cases from different standpoints, one perhaps focused on remaining engaged locally from an understanding of how this enables influence and intelligence, and the other perhaps more focused on the

high-political stakes or responses from a Danish public in situations where a decision has to be made to stay engaged or decouple.

The experience from all the cases here is that automatic reactions (of withdrawal or suspension in particular) are far from ideal, and that a substantial amount of political courage is needed to see past the immediate urge to decouple and withdraw from a context or a country. If a decoupling is demanded by the political level, embassies often find themselves in situations of creatively decoupling from the national government while remaining engaged in other and perhaps more subtle ways that do not necessarily connect them directly to the incumbent government. As such, embassies (and the MFA altogether) have to manage the cross pressure between the need for political (symbolic) action and the importance of staying engaged for the sake of the local population but also for the sake of not worsening situations for the local state institutions that often have responsibility for service delivery etc. These challenges are exacerbated by the concern that top management in ministries are close to the ministers and as such caught between two chairs.

This concern is deeply related to the differences of political ambitions that lies in pursuing value-driven foreign policy vis-à-vis more pragmatic forms. All cases here stress the need for ministers and the political level to maintain more pragmatic approaches to assessing situations of autocratisation. That concerns both the speed with which e.g. Western democratic values or democratic changes are pushed by the donor community during incremental processes of both autocratisation and democratisation, as well as the response that follows from ruptures. Myanmar, as an example, shows how development actors may have been too assertive in their efforts to speed up democratisation, eventually leading to factions in the military feeling they were losing power too quickly and pushing them over the edge of executing the military coup. As such, there are limits to how much activities should be profiled, and how much public or political pressure should be made. Something that of course requires development actors to consider their definitions of success and work from more sobering steps, incremental changes or forms of calibration. In itself a hard sell to a public or a donor government – promises from different government institutions to never put into the effect the anti-LGBT law, in the case of Uganda, is not a victory understood or appreciated equally at all political or public levels.

Evidence and when to trust it. Evidence is decisive – it is what informs analyses of autocratisation processes taking place or gradually withering away and giving room for positive development, it is what provides indications of imminent coups or ruptures, and it is pivotal in responding to such ruptures that create situations of low

supply of information. That is obviously the case across all efforts of development, but it is intensified in the contexts explored here and especially so in the ones where ruptures entail decisions have to be made swiftly (perhaps pointing to a schism here that the longer or more incremental the autocratisation, the more time for analysis, but perhaps also less push for it as decisions do not have to be made under radically altered conditions). Evidence depends on concerns such as networks, positions, and capacities – not unilateral in form but drawing on all kinds of bilateral and multilateral partners – all of them both formal and informal in nature.

For the cases engaged here that included military coups, the overarching sensation is that no one saw any of the coups coming. Most situations had indications that something might be brooding, but in a state of asymmetric information and intelligence, such indications can be hard to decipher and begs the question raised by many of the interviewees as to ‘when to pull the trigger’. In other words, when are you sufficiently certain about specific pieces of information or intelligence when you already must navigate a situation of potential deep ambiguity (and if other larger development partners have not alerted in response to changing circumstances, why should we?). Not least because doing so – pressing the button – obviously comes with major consequences of activating not just headquarters but the entire group of development actors. Several of the cases show, and the interviewees stress this themselves, that intelligence should not only come from likeminded development partners, the EU group etc. but that it needs to be increasingly sought from a larger circle of actors beyond those regularly engaged with, including in neighbouring countries (think of Southern Chinese provinces vis-à-vis Myanmar or Mali vis-à-vis Burkina Faso).

Local flexibility and agency. One of the absolute core concerns here remains the balance between local flexibility at embassies and the involvement of headquarter in shaping and making decisions. And it is certainly not a uniform picture across the cases explored – while some have involved Copenhagen throughout their efforts of adjusting and responding to autocratisation, others have been more assertive in driving the process themselves and working with headquarters ex post or mainly through information sharing. Experiences across the cases connects this balance to the degree and form of autocratisation. In cases of incremental autocratisation with more than enough time to maintain regular dialogue and communication and find common ground, involvement from headquarters seems to be appreciated and seen as supportive for the embassy's efforts. In situations of ruptures, where decisions are to be made over the course of hours or days and are highly influenced by contextual drivers, it is a different picture that seems to distillate the dissimilar

positionalities and bring into potential conflict interests such as local contextual concerns vis-à-vis Danish political ones, generally seen as frustrating by the embassies (with ministerial top-management seen as part of the political level for their closeness to ministers). To this obviously comes resources and capacities, including the value of local staff, as in staff from the given country.

All the cases, however, show the strengths of a lean and agile system that does not include too many layers or bureaucratic requirements (often juxtaposed to the EU, where it 'takes three months to change direction'), and a short route from embassy-level to the minister in question. Meaning flexibility as a form of self-determinacy as well, on part of the embassies. Maintaining the initiative to suggest models and changes for local support is stressed as crucial to both the speed and the contextualized nature of the response (though pace itself is not necessarily to be counted as important vis-à-vis making the right decisions). But this also creates a dilemma between formalised response and agency. It is clear from interviews in most of the cases that the symbolic absence of a chapter in the aid management guidelines on 'What to do if you experience a coup', whilst good for flexibility and agency, raises the demands locally at embassies. If not formalized in guidelines, staff depend partly on their own experiences and capacities, and partly on learning and sparring with other representations facing similar challenges. The ability to muddle through a major local political or security crises is neither easy nor something that can be taken as a given skill for embassy staff if it is not explicitly taught. This includes striking a balance between initiative and coordination, with many of the interviewees here expressing a need to not always coordinate with, wait for, or follow suit with the rest of the local group of likeminded development actors, but also maintain the self-confidence and authority to decide one's own decision-path. These dilemmas may allude to a need for some kind of formalized arrangement on experience-sharing among embassies, either in the form of single point-of-entry in the ministry that may be contacted for discussion in the event of increased autocratisation or rupture, or of a group of experienced staff with whom embassy staff may spar. If guidelines are needed, they are only so at the level of process-guidelines for how to enable sparring and experience-sharing across staff with experience in these contexts and situations, not at a level where they set our rigid courses of actions that limit embassies' room for maneuvering.

Further, the importance of understanding not only backsliding but progress, and having flexibility to support it, comes out clearly in the cases. Flexibility, initiative, and adaptation does not only concern suspension or the 'negative' or regressive side of things. It equally concerns the important task of being able to identify progress and

advancements when they occur, improving the conditions for a return (in the case of decoupling) or readjustments in ways that can re-connect with actors that were perhaps taken out of the portfolio for various political reasons. The cases showed clearly that whilst this side of things should be characterized by a similar flexibility, it rarely is, and it appears much easier to suspend aid than to re-engage. Part of the reason here is found in how some countries seem to fall into boxes of hard-to-change narratives, including in the MFA; narratives of what a country is and is not, what can be done there and what cannot, that are extremely difficult to escape.

Combining strategic objectives and short-term adaptability. Managing ambiguity is a tall task that often leads to short-term decision-making and with good reason. Dynamic context requires an adaptive approach to implementation that sees interventions continuously adjusted and attuned to the local political realities, much akin to small-scale experimentation in almost real-time. While it may seem difficult or naïve to embrace anything truly long-term in contexts of autocratic ruptures, the cases here all stress the need to not fall completely into a trap of individualized short-term engagements, for the ways this dilutes the potential for any sense of direction. No matter the vulnerability of a given context, greater strategic goalposts are needed, within which pragmatic adaptations and adjustments can then be made. Country strategic frameworks are highlighted for the way they help set out strategic goalposts whilst providing flexibility in the short term. The cases stress the importance of having a strong narrative of why and for what Denmark is present and contributes locally, a narrative that serves as a declaration of intent and provides direction, enabling one to see beyond short-term causes or effects and pay better attention to root causes.

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