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Does international democracy promotion work?

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Abstract

This paper addresses the question “does international democracy promotion work?” It argues that the simple answer is both yes and no, and that it all depends - on how we define democracy promotion and its objectives, and on which particular approaches, methods or tools are used to promote democracy. Most importantly for present purposes is that the methods for assessing even the least contentious forms of democracy promotion, namely those that are usually called by the name of democracy assistance, are underdeveloped in more than one respect. Considerable conceptual and methodological difficulties stand in the way of achieving more scientifically verifiable knowledge about them and understanding the connections with actual political change. The assessments that have been carried out tend to reach only modest conclusions about international democracy promotion’s effectiveness and its contribution to democratisation abroad.¹ The paper concludes by arguing the relevance of not just trying harder to overcome the difficulties of assessment, but in addition integrating assessments and their findings more closely into the policy making process. Gaps in the policy process might owe to a combination of political and bureaucratic circumstances, or be due to reasons that are inherent in the nature of international democracy promotion itself. However, a double shift in how we address the question whether democracy promotions works, moving from the *ex post* assessment of democracy assistance to the *ex ante* appraisal of future policies to promote democracy by all means, can only aid strategic thinking about how and, indeed, whether to promote democracy abroad and, not least, contribute better to the political fortunes of societies for whose benefit these endeavours are intended.

1 Even though European Union efforts to apply its Copenhagen criteria to would-be accession states constitute a partial exception. See for example Kelley (2004), Vachudova (2005) and Pridham (2005).

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1 Introduction

In its position paper *Promoting Democracy in German Development Policy* the Bundesministerium für wirtschaftliche Zusammenarbeit und Entwicklung / German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ 2005) quotes approvingly at the very outset former UN Secretary General Kofi Anan's words, "*Democracy does not belong to any country or region but is a universal right.*" From the late 1980s onwards there has been a significant increase in international democracy promotion by all means. The number of new organisations set up solely for the purpose of providing democracy assistance, the democracy programmes and projects offered by existing development agencies possessing much broader mandates, and the financial resources allocated to democracy support have all increased significantly, most notably in the United States and the European Union (EU) and its member states, and more recently at the United Nations too. Several big arguments have been offered by policy makers in the established democracies to explain and justify this development, ranging from the intrinsic universal value of democracy that imposes some kind of moral obligation on the existing democracies to share their good fortune with others, to various kinds of more instrumental rationale grounded in the goals of universal peace, global development and prosperity, social justice and meeting 'new security' threats such as the uncontrolled migration of peoples and international terrorism. Given the profile that international democracy promotion has now acquired at the levels both of policy rhetoric and practical engagement, an obvious question to ask is whether it actually works. Surely academic analysts, interested think-tanks and, not least, the policy-makers and democracy practitioners themselves should all be interested in the answer to the question this paper seeks to address: "does international democracy promotion work?"

First, the answer. Readers might be disappointed to hear that the answer is 'Both yes...and no...and it all depends'. Which in turn means that there are probably more interesting questions to do with 'what works?', 'under what conditions?', and 'why?'. Even more elemental, 'how do we know?' The following sections touch on each one of these.

But first, what *is* international democracy promotion (IDP)?

2 What is IDP?

There is a confusing lexicon of terms – democracy promotion, democracy support, democracy assistance, democracy aid, political development aid and so on. And just as with accounts of official development assistance, where the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (DAC-OECD) provides us with a commonly accepted working definition, we can cut to chase and anchor ourselves to a respected institutional definition. The European Council of Ministers (2006, 1, note1) in its report on "The EU Approach to Democracy Promotion in External Relations. Food for Thought" provides this service where it takes the term democracy promotion "*to encompass the full range of external relations and development cooperation activities which contribute to the development and consolidation of democracy in third countries,*" which is to say "*all measures designed to facilitate democratic development*" (ibid, 3).

So, the end would seem to be clear. As for the means, the approaches, methods, instruments, tools or, even as one writer puts it, weapons, these are many and varied. We can try to summarise the set and arrange the relation between them in a number of ways. For instance Levitsky / Way (2005) have two categories: 'leverage' and 'linkage'. An alternative approach offered here is to deploy the idea of power as a continuum or gradation of relationships. That runs from, at the 'soft power' end, democracy assistance and persuasion and other non-coercive forms of influence, through pressure for instance diplomatic pressure, political conditionalities and threat of sanctions, all the way to the really hard power or coercive end, including the use of force - what might be called democracy intervention in the same way as 'humanitarian intervention' has come to include forcible interventions against the wishes of host governments, justified in the name of fundamental human rights. In practice there are bound to be some individual instances of promotion that are hard to categorise cleanly. Moreover identical cases are capable of being construed differently by different actors, by the different parties to the relationship.

The reasons to promote democracy, even just those that circulate most prominently in the public domain, vary considerably. On the one side, there is democracy conceived as a universal value (Sen 1999) to which all humankind has an entitlement. Seen from this viewpoint the established liberal democracies perhaps have some kind of moral obligation to help spread, secure and defend this particular political order. On the other hand there are the reasons grounded in its instrumental worth for a considerable array of 'good things:' to quote the European Council of Ministers (2006, 2) again, "*The embedding of democracy and democratic process in third countries holds out the best prospect for the development by them of effective policies related to global issues of particular concern to EU citizens.*" Comparable sentiments have been expressed by the White House in Washington DC and from the capitals of other countries around the world, from Canada to Australia and, not least, in the United Nations, where not only successive Secretary Generals but the loosely organised intergovernmental Community of Democracies have strongly emphasised both democracy's intrinsic *and* its instrumental value.

So, does IDP work? A question that is simple to ask, a question that clearly should be asked, but not one that is anything like straightforward to answer. For several reasons.

3 In terms of *what* does IDP work?

First we must be more specific: in terms *what* does IDP work? Do we mean is it effective in terms of promoting *democracy*? Or promoting the *conditions* (and, if you believe there are some *preconditions*, those too) for democracy? Or promoting the *ends* that are supposed to be realised through democratisation? It is entirely feasible that IDP might be successful in terms of furthering democratisation, but either democratisation, or the way in which it is brought about as a result of IDP, proves less than effective in dealing with the problems to which it is supposed to be a solution. This possibility is made all the more likely by the great variety of goals associated with achieving democracy, and by the fact that the goals themselves or the process of reaching them do not have a nice orderly symbiotic relationship to one another. In short, there may be tensions, trade-offs, opportunity costs, at least in the short to medium terms. To illustrate, there are countries – failed states and weak states - where for the time being establishing political stability is (or perhaps should be) the priority. Democracy building there might get in the way, even though a

concentration on state building *now* might itself frustrate the prospects for democratisation later on.² More generally one of the lessons we learn from international *development* cooperation is that setting multiple goals for a single form of intervention can result in *none* of the goals being achieved to anyone's satisfaction.

So, to make life simpler the rest of the discussion here will be narrowed to the more immediate objective: does democracy promotion promote democracy and democracy's requisites?

4 What works in democracy promotion?

Given the plurality of different methods or approaches to promoting democracy, it would be unwise to expect one single overarching judgment about effectiveness. There is a problem here in that the different methods, tools and so on for promoting democracy tend to aim at *different* objectives, each one of which may have to be measured in its *own way*, and by its own standards of achievement. This complicates the business of making comparisons across methods let alone frustrates the desire to arrive at some sort of consolidated judgment. To illustrate, establishing whether the attachment of political conditionalities to, say, a trade deal really does incentivise a government to make certain concessions – such as legislating more civil liberties and political rights – *differs* from identifying whether the sponsorship of social learning, socialisation or acculturation into democratic values really does change attitudes *and not merely* the outward behaviour, and whether it really does bring about a *principled* commitment to democracy rather than a more calculated deference primarily interested in acquiring the side benefits of external legitimacy and respect. Then, when reaching out and seeking to effect change, whether in attitudes or behaviour or both, there is the issue of who matters most: critical segments of the political elite, or the mass of ordinary people?

In recent years there has been some impressive independent research carried out on some specific approaches to promoting democracy especially on EU efforts (for example Kelley 2004; Vachudova 2005); and there has also been some research into a number of the instruments and their effectiveness when employed on behalf of *other* ends than democracy or used in rather *different* international contexts. Trade sanctions and investment embargoes in the cases of Cuba and apartheid South Africa are two examples. On these, the picture we get from quite a wealth of research – a rich evidence base but by no means comprehensive or systematic – is very mixed. In the matter of sanctions, for instance, the risk of 'double jeopardy' tends to loom very large, that is to say it is the powerless in society who tend to suffer most, with no certainty that the regime will change – think of Zimbabwe under Mugabe, or Myanmar.

In the case of political conditionalities, there is a *good* story to tell at least in regard to the EU and its application of the 1993 Copenhagen criteria to accession candidates. There is near universal agreement on this. But there is also disagreement on how meaningful the changes really are in respect of building *good* democracy in the prospective new member states. No less significant there is disagreement on how and why conditionality has made a

2 Thomas Carothers (2007) for instance has recently offered some interesting views on this.

positive contribution. For instance there are contrasting views on whether conditionality worked less because of its own intrinsic merits and more by virtue of being combined with other methods or tools, like democracy assistance. Or, possibly much more significant even than that, perhaps conditionality worked by and through interaction with *domestic* constituencies for democratic change in the accession countries. That is to say, the results all depend on how far *local* actors in the country take advantage of the new political space that conditionality-based pressure applied to their government has helped create. The critical nature of the *domestic* input to the shape of the end result, as it were, is a point that comes out very strongly in many of the most closely informed field studies of democracy support – investigations that have used method of process tracing to get a handle on the reasons why things turned out the way they did (see for example Åslund / McFaul 2006, on Ukraine's 'Orange Revolution'). To say this is in no way to deny that international diffusion, too, plays a role in sparking democratic transitions, and that there can be 'neighbourhood' effects (both favourable and unfavourable to democracy's diffusion), and that in certain cases like the European Union, membership of a regional organisation can help to consolidate democratic reforms, which is what Pevehouse (2002) claims the analysis of event history tells us.

All things considered, however, there is a shortage of robust frameworks for comparing the effectiveness of different instruments or *combinations* of instruments – approaches that themselves make use of 'inputs' that vary so greatly *in kind* that it is difficult to know how *even they* can be compared, let alone establish and then compare the relative *rates of return*. Therefore, and once again to make life simple, I narrow the discussion down further, by concentrating on just democracy assistance pure and simple (DA). DA comprises non-threatening, largely concessional, that is grant-aided transfers of support (material, technical, and financial) to pro-democracy initiatives of the sort we are all familiar with: elections observation; improving electoral management capability; capacity building in civil society, legislative strengthening, even help with building political parties, and so on. Even then, the best way to categorise some specific initiatives can be ambiguous. At the one end, in some low income countries under stress DA shades off into conflict management techniques and peace and reconciliation efforts. And in countries that are judged to be highly strategic in geopolitical terms countries attempts to influence the structure of civilian-military relations, too, can look like democracy assistance, when viewed from one angle, but may look more like 'security assistance' when viewed from another. And at the other end there is an equally blurry border with attempts to create better governance and, beyond that, improvements in public policy for things like managing the economy.

In view of the complexity of the issue, this is a good place to introduce a yet further self-limiting clause into the assessment here. Assessing whether DA (i.e. political projects and programmes aimed *directly* at certain political objectives) works, is quite enough to be going on with, without investigating *indirect* approaches to promoting democracy through seeking to influence democracy's conditions or prerequisites, most notably the economic factors. That economic well-being helps make stable democracy sustainable is about as close to an iron law as political science gets – almost on a par with the democratic peace theory that says democracies do not usually go to war with one another. But it may not be very interesting for democracy promoters, given the various caveats and qualifications that could be introduced. For instance: is there some minimum threshold of economic achievement that must be met first? We do know that some very poor countries such as India have sustained democracy over many years. And we also know that some relatively

prosperous countries have yet to get there – and may never get there, Singapore and liberal democracy for example. The *quality* of democracy in a number of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is - according to the critics – moving in inverse direction to their increasing material wealth. Furthermore, development economists have yet to come up with a commonly agreed recipe for delivering economic development in the challenging circumstances that many low income and developing countries present. Some advisers argue for *more development aid*, while others suggest that the limits of aid absorptive capacity have already been met or even exceeded (see for example Browne 2006; Easterly 2006). And, of course, in the real world as distinct from the economic textbooks, foreign aid allocations are in any case influenced by geo-strategic and other extraneous considerations as much as they are by concern for the likely developmental pay-off – let alone being guided by the indirect consequences for democracy in the partner countries.

So, *development* assistance could be *one* way of trying to assist democratisation; and there are indications that more of development aid is now going to countries with better civil liberties and political rights compared to the Cold War period (Sundberg / Gelb 2006, 16). Moreover, if as Faust (2006) argues, more democratic donor countries are more committed to development in poor countries, then there is the happy possibility of a kind of virtuous circle emerging, of benefit to development and democratisation, if not now then in the future. Nevertheless, the discussion here does not pursue these complex and contested issues, but instead stays with the simpler question: does *direct* democracy assistance work?

Obviously, I am not the first to pose the question, let alone the first to hazard an answer. And yet there is a remarkable dearth of certain knowledge about best practice in democracy support, relative to the substantial accumulated understanding we now have of what seems *not* to work well and of the reasons why not. In regard to what *does* work, democracy practitioners do not show an abundant confidence about having the answers, not least because the methodology, or methodologies, for finding out this information are by common consent underdeveloped. Moreover the methods are prone to some well known shortcomings and flaws. However, before proceeding to explore this aspect further, a short detour into the empirical realm of assessments will convey the flavour of some attempts that have recently been made to shed light on the issue of how well does it work.

5 Some findings from democracy assistance assessments

Let me first look at the EU, which together with the democracy aid of its member states accounts for around US\$ 3 billion expenditure on democracy, governance and related activities annually, and which is more than the US spend on similar goals. The European Commission's *Thematic Evaluation of EC Support to Good Governance* (Bossuyt et al. 2006), notwithstanding the report's title, in fact takes in a selection of EU democracy and human rights support efforts, too, drawing on fieldwork research conducted in countries as diverse as Ukraine and Indonesia, Angola and Guatemala. And rather helpful to our purposes the report also includes a summary of lessons learned from some other donors' evaluations, stating that "Overall, the impact of external assistance has been at best *modest*" (ibid., Volume 2, Annex 12, 1). Indeed, "*some of the most successful initiatives have deliberately eschewed (avoided) external support*"! (ibid.) While the report is willing to say that the Commission has made "*significant progress with its use of political and pol-*

icy dialogue as a strategic tool,” (ibid., Vol. 1, 55) the best it is prepared to say about the assistance projects and programmes is that they “*can, under certain conditions, be effective and efficient tools.*” (ibid., Vol. 1, 46) At the same time – and as already indicated more generally – the report adds the qualifying statement that it is the local environment in the partner countries that is the main determinant of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness otherwise of EU support. Thus, “*the jury is still out on whether the assistance outcomes will be sustained over time and lead to systemic changes at the level of a given country, situation, or civil society organisation*” (Bossuyt et al. 2006, Volume 1, Executive Summary, 5).

Second, a slightly more up-beat but still sobering assessment of democracy assistance comes from US Agency for International Development (USAID), the largest national provider of such projects and programmes. A USAID commissioned evaluation (Finkel et al. 2006) concluded that over the period studied, 1990–2003, USAID’s democracy and governance assistance to well over one hundred countries on average left them with higher Freedom House and Polity IV scores for democracy than they could have been expected to achieve otherwise. The study surmised that the benefits were lagged and cumulative. Interestingly the findings for human rights support were negative. The overall democracy dividend was itself very small anyway, because the aid commitment had been so very small (the average eligible country received only US\$ 2.07 million per year during the period). Unlike the EU study which drew on a number of *qualitative* sources (interviews; focus groups, and so on) as well as quantitative analysis, the report commissioned by USAID was exclusively and rigorously quantitative, which means that it carries all the potential pitfalls associated with gathering and interpreting evidence on that basis.

Third, and down at the qualitative end of methodology there is by now a substantial volume of studies by dedicated democracy assistance watchers located in academia and think tanks, of whom Thomas Carothers is easily the most pre-eminent (Carothers 1999 is a seminal work), together with institutional level studies by some democracy assistance agencies themselves. Thus Carothers for example has steadily moved through the different DA sectors, producing big books on civil society, on strengthening the rule of law, and, most recently, on party aid (Carothers 2006). In none of these sectors do we find him offering a very rosy assessment. For the time being anyway parties and party support in emerging democracies are something like the ‘flavour of the month’, at least in terms of talk, although the evidence of performance to date looks no more convincing and the challenges look no easier than in respect of the other sectors of democracy support (e.g. see also Burnell 2006a; 2006c; Erdmann 2006; Hällhag 2006).

Aside from the routine monitoring and the less frequent set-piece assessments of their democracy work by such development cooperation actors as DANIDA (Danish International Development Agency), SIDA (Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency) and Germany’s GTZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit), two fairly recent but contrasting examples of *organisational* evaluation among the publicly funded democracy foundations are one of the Dutch Institute for Multiparty Democracy (European Centre for Development Policy Management 2005) and one of Britain’s Westminster Foundation Democracy (River Path Associates 2005). The former generally speaking came up with a very positive account of the institution and its approach; the latter was much more critical. Now, putting these accounts together with Carothers’ work and studies in the academic literature, and trying to come up with the equivalent of an aggregate score

for democracy assistance - which is probably a really stupid thing to try to do (partly for reasons to be explained shortly) – my guess for marks out of ten would be somewhere around 3.5. That is not very impressive - although it might compare quite favourably with the extent of *political commitment* as measured by the resources of money and personnel and the willingness to override competing foreign policy goals that the established democracies have so far put in (see Youngs 2006). Be that as it may, even these figures should be taken with a pinch of salt, given that one thing we can be more certain about is: *we do not really know* how well democracy assistance is working. That is to say, *we know that we do not know*. And that before coming to any further conclusions we must work harder to improve our methods for assessing democracy support, if we are to say things with greater confidence about either the evaluation processes or the results. This brings us back to the core issue here, namely why is assessing democracy assistance so difficult?

6 Why is assessing democracy assistance so difficult?

Even after narrowing down the challenge to weighing up the performance of direct support to democratisation by assistance alone, and without even looking at the policy drivers or rationales that lie behind this, it is easy to develop a long list of conundrums afflicting the business of assessment. What follows is a sort of top ten list (see also USAID 2005; Green / Kohl 2007).

6.1 What is, or what counts as, sustainable democracy and democratic progress? Where are the borders between these and human rights, and the rule of law, and better governance? If political governance is *in*, but *economic* governance is *out*, where does the dividing line fall? And what about the governance that goes on outside, beneath and below *governments*? Are the analytical boundaries between democracy on the one hand and democracy's conditions or prerequisites on the other sharply delineated and commonly agreed? Where for instance do we place political culture: does *civic culture*, however defined, supply one of democracy's defining terms? Or is it a necessary condition in order for democracy to become consolidated? Or is it neither of these, or both of them?

6.2 How do we *measure* and compare improvement, especially if, as many commentators acknowledge, democracy can quite legitimately take different forms depending on the historical and cultural foundations of society (BMZ 2005, 5)? There are alternative, one might even say competing, frameworks and associated indicators on offer, ranging from the more minimalist to the most maximalist. Even some of the most widely used proxies have attracted criticism, not least the Freedom House freedom ratings. See for example the United Nations Development Programme Governance Centre in Oslo, which aspires to develop a more locally owned - and that means locally responsive - set of indicators (UNDP s. a.).

6.3 Should we be aspiring to measure democratic progress in *quantitative* terms anyway? While the *qualitative* profiling of democracy is currently fashionable (see for example Merkel 2004) and we can attempt to attach relative weightings to the different democratic properties such as accountability and participation, these exercises are inevitably still judgmental and they leave open considerable discretion over how we arrive at some aggregate figure (Coppedge 2002). In this situation unanimous verdicts about the precise extent of movement towards or away from democracy look most unlikely.

6.4 If measuring the *output* of a democracy assistance effort looks relatively simple, assessing the *outcomes* is much more difficult. The effectiveness of democracy assistance in a particular sector, say a civil society capacity building programme, might be represented in the number of viable new civil society organisations that are helped to get off the ground. But the *impact*, meaning what that does for civil society and what *that* in turn does for democratisation, is not so obvious. Just how do we filter out the influence on outcomes exerted by ‘noise in the system’ – the influence of the other democracy assistance programmes and of other democracy assistance actors working in this or related sectors, political party support for instance? And how do we filter out *all the other influences*, both domestic and foreign, positive and negative - what might be called *passive* as distinct from active (that is to say, intentional) promotion of democracy (see Burnell 2006b)? This filtering can be extraordinarily difficult in those complex situations where international involvement in peace-making, state building, economic reconstruction and humanitarian interventions are all taking place side by side. The problem leads directly to the next conundrum.

6.5 There is the vexed question of assigning *effects* to a specific *cause*, that is *attribution*. How can we prove beyond doubt that a certain consequence was ‘caused’ by this or that initiative in democracy aid, given that we can never know the counterfactual, that is, what would have happened in the absence of external involvement? Correlations and co-variations are all very interesting, but in trying to make sense of *connections* – which is an exercise that could be more interesting and certainly more useful for policy-making – how can we be so sure that there is a connection in the first place?

6.6 What is the most appropriate time horizon and what is the right timing – the best census date – for collecting evidence of achievement (or lack of achievement)? Projects might have to promise quick results in order to qualify for political and financial backing, but building democracy can be a long haul and the benefits slow to appear – and, hence, best audited later rather than sooner.

6.7 Should we, and if so, how do we, factor in the amount of resistance or the obstacles to democratic reform, when trying to assess and compare instances of success and failure? After all, not only the existing power-holders but many people in society, too, might be suspicious or fearful of change. Remember, there are situations where the question whether or not to democratise is not the only – or even the main – game in town. Another way of putting the point is that countries differ in their capacity to effect democratic change and also *in their absorptive capacity for democracy support*, which is their potential to derive real and lasting benefit from it. So perhaps assessing the performance of democracy assistance might be a bit like scoring an Olympic games high diving event – award one score for the degree of difficulty and a second score for the standard of execution, *but with a further adjustment* to the marks that takes potential into account (perhaps a discount rate should be applied in the case of performers who were able to train full-time in well equipped United States’ colleges or the Chinese military academy compared to those who have had to earn their livelihood in other ways while simultaneously preparing to compete in poor and badly equipped developing countries). To illustrate, EU conditionalities have worked, but in the easy cases, where the ‘carrot,’ namely admission to the EU, has been hard to resist. Surely the true test comes in the ‘new neighbourhood states’ where everyone knows that EU accession will never be on offer and the countries are economically

less well developed and in some cases have relatively very weak state structures and administrative capabilities.

6.8 In democracy assistance, views on what a good *assessment* looks like will vary along with ideas about the purpose of making assessments in the first place. Is it to make democracy assistance practitioners accountable? To insulate them from arbitrary political interference? To ensure ‘value-for-money’? A public relations exercise? To review experience and learn lessons from that? Different DA organisations and different interested parties take different positions on these puzzles. Perhaps one of the more significant points of polarisation in this particular debate about methods involves the belief that assessments must be as participatory as possible, as befits the notion that both democracy and democratisation themselves must be participatory phenomena. This spills over into a belief that the participatory assessment of democracy aid itself is – or should be turned into – a vehicle for building democracy. Ranged on the other side however are commentators who are less passionate about participatory assessment, inclined to be more sceptical about the benefits and emphasise the difficulties, distortions and costs (examples can be found in Green and Kohl 2007), as well as analysts whose very ideas of democracy and democratisation attach less significance to the participatory content. Put differently, then, the answer to the question what do we learn from assessing DA in part depends on what we think assessing DA should set out to do: that is to say, the main objective(s) of doing an assessment.

6.9 Knowledge sharing: only recently has there been much of an effort to share understanding about assessment methods for DA (see Burnell 2007b), but is even this welcome development but an imperfect substitute for exchanging results – an admission that we have little certain knowledge of DA success or failure, or, perhaps, a reluctance to disclose what is known for fear of embarrassment or because to do so might breach legitimate confidentiality, place overseas partners in peril, or require more candour about the true motives and intentions of DA than policy makers feel able to reveal. To illustrate, a project authentically aimed at aiding *democracy* might be defined and presented in terms of human rights or governance in order to win acceptability, but what criteria should then be used to measure its performance? And what should be communicated to other members of the democracy assistance industry, where it would be only natural for each actor to want to put only its best foot forward?

6.10 Finally, rounding off the top ten list brings us to the issue of institutional learning, which is something that the report on the EU already mentioned (Bossuyt et al. 2006) says is woefully lacking in the EU at least. Indeed, if there is one lesson to be culled from all the literature on DA that is more striking than all the rest, it is this lack of institutional learning. An outlier can be found in the report by Cole et al. (2006) on the UNDP’s Office of Evaluation, although that looked at learning in the UNDP’s development programmes before its recent considerable expansion into democratic governance support (now running close to US\$ 1.5 billion annually), where the findings of repeat investigation conducted against this new background would potentially offer very interesting reading.

In reality there is a double deficit here. First, there seems to be only limited capability to benefit from the lengthy experience of international *development* cooperation, where mistakes have been made in the past, lessons learned, and where development economists do have some relevant advice to give. And second, there is a failure to take note of and respond appropriately to an emerging body of lessons from doing *democracy assistance*.

This deficit refers then both to the *under-institutionalisation of procedures for creating institutional memory* (on both a collective and individual agency basis) and to an absence of joined-up relations between DA *practice* and the democracy promotion *policy process*. It is as if there needs to be a double shift (Burnell forthcoming/a): from *ex post* (after the event) to *ex ante* (ahead of time), and from *assessing DA* alone to *appraising democracy promotion* by all means possible, namely the full complement of tools, methods or approaches and their different combinations. In a nutshell, there is scope for more strategic thinking (see Burnell 2005). That is the single most important proposition in this whole discussion. Which makes it appropriate to finish with just a few albeit rudimentary suggestions trying to explain the gap, between the *ex post* assessment of DA and *ex ante* appraisal of democracy promotion: a ‘starter pack’ to prompt further reflection.

7 Exploring the policy process gap?

There are at least three directions in which the policy process gap in democracy promotion assessment might be explored by future research and they are not necessarily mutually inconsistent.

First, the view might be taken that the problem is *inherent in the nature of international democracy promotion* – a fuzzy, loose, multifaceted assortment of endeavours, engaged in by a *diverse* plurality of actors of *different* sorts. Inevitably, this leads to incoherence in terms of the aims, goals, objectives and thereby indicators. This, in turn, is a constraining force on useful learning – learning that influences strategy and policy – at the level of the individual agency and the democracy support industry as a whole. Added to which, unlike in international *development* cooperation, there is no one dominant central supplier like the World Bank with the resources and the incentive to try to make the practice of democracy assistance evaluation more professional. USAID’s recent efforts to improve its assessment procedures come closest (see Sarles 2007). The full bundle of requisites that sound evaluations of anything demand – clarity of purpose, well defined goals, explicit programme logics, measurability of performance – is perhaps too much to ask. And that means the chances of making a sound assessment are blighted from the start.

A second way of going about trying to explain the gap would be by citing *bureaucratic* failings: poor communication links between programme designers, practitioners, and assessors, and between the very different actors who would claim to be involved in democracy promotion even within the same institution or the same government or intergovernmental machine. At times these disconnects are exacerbated by the fact that the authorities who commission studies of democracy assistance are not themselves the implementing actors. For example, independent consultants report their findings about the performance of a purportedly autonomous political foundation to the development aid ministry or the foreign ministry that supplied its funds, with the result that none of the three parties involved has a very strong sense of ownership of the report or is wholly satisfied with its recommendations. Similarly academic writings are read mainly, if at all, by other academics and tend not to be couched in a form that are accessible to hard-pressed policy personnel or to practitioners stationed far away in the field.

A third approach to exploring the gap then focuses much more on *political* reasons. For much of the time the ‘high policy’ makers in international politics are simply too busy, or

too distracted by other more pressing priorities to pay much attention to the question of whether democracy assistance and promotion work or do not work. And in any case it is only to be expected – and perhaps is only right – that the political decision to lend support to democratisation around the world is influenced by *other considerations* than technocratic issues concerning which approach works best. Put differently, even if much of democracy assistance could be scientifically proven to be largely *ineffective* in its own terms there might still be other – even good – reasons for the commitment to remain in place. For instance as a response to demands expressed by the electorate at home or by peoples desperately struggling for basic political freedoms abroad – at minimum as a symbolic gesture to international solidarity. After all, which government in the West can be expected to stand up at the present time and say that trying to support democracy or human rights abroad is a bad thing, a waste of time?

And the converse could well be true, too. That is to say, even if DA could be scientifically shown to be highly *effective* at supporting democratisation, there might be reasons and possibly *good* reasons to become less supportive. In time its relevance may come to be questioned. Such as when democratic change far from realising all the good things that have been associated with it instead appears to bring less desirable consequences in its train in the short to medium term, anyway. Examples could include political instability, tense relationships between governments that previously were on good terms or elected governments that turn out to be unfriendly. There could also be an environment in which democratic contestants for power quite understandably put key interest group demands at home and the domestic political imperative of deferring to short-term electoral opinion above pursuing the rational long term needs of global society – cutting carbon emissions to slow down global warming for instance.

But of course the discussion is now drifting dangerously close to the rocks of speculation, controversy, in short, the policy drivers that lie behind the political interest in promoting democracy. So this is a good place to put down the anchor and reach some sort of conclusion.

8 Conclusion

Does international democracy promotion work? Yes, ... and No.

‘**Yes**’ in so far as there is a reasonable amount of evidence to suggest that *some* cases of democracy promotion have had *some* effect especially when we go on to specify the cases more closely in terms of approach, time, place and circumstance. But that is not the same thing as *overall impact*; and it certainly leaves open the distinct possibility that either one of other and unintended influences from outside or domestic influences from within or both played a much stronger determining role.

So ‘**No**’, for notwithstanding near on 20 years of international democracy promotion, and writing at a time when the most recent ‘wave’ of democracy or democratisation appears to have peaked, still *under* half the countries in the world and *less* than half of humankind live in political systems that most conventional judgments would call *liberal* democracies. Furthermore few if any people live in a more democratically enriched version of democracy than liberal democracy, such as highly participatory forms of democracy let alone the

much more egalitarian forms of social democracy that radical writers have mused on down the years. Moreover, the quality of democracy even in some of the longer established democracies like the US and UK is considered by serious observers to be facing major problems or is already in steep decline.

‘Yes? No? We Really do not Know’. Because the art of assessing democracy support has not yet caught up with the art of assessing the state of democracy – something that itself is still in flux. In reality only now are we beginning to compare and think of ways of improving on the existing methods for evaluating democracy support. The issue of who is best placed to answer questions about whether democracy support works or not, and how well it works, is up for grabs. But when compared to what are variously called the partners, clients, recipients, or other final stakeholders of such support, readers in the democracy promoting countries may not be the most appropriate people to judge whether it is working or not. No one can be confident that we know and understand enough to make clear, clean, confident judgments – except in terms of some very broad brush generalisations of the sort that may not be very useful to policy makers.

What we are *not* short of, however, is explanations of why democracy assistance fails, assuming it is not difficult to agree on what failure means in this context, whether in some absolute sense or relative to ambition. It is ironic that while we flounder around trying to measure the benefit that democracy assistance means for democratisation, very little attention seems to be given to finding out when, where, and under what circumstances democracy promotion not merely fails but actually does *more harm than good*. Just as in efforts in international *development* cooperation, there may be cases where the endeavours actually do a disservice to the cause that is sought. Or, if not quite that, cases where democracy support leads to excessive collateral damage along the way, unsought after-consequences for other desired values inside the partner countries – for social order, political stability, governance capability and so on. After all, knowledge about what works can be a powerful tool – no less so than when it ends up in the wrong hands. We are still toiling in the foothills of establishing what can be known with any real certainty. And in regard to realising the potential benefits of institutional learning there still seems to be a very long way to go. While it might well be true to say that experience in recent decades shows there are no foolproof ‘road maps for successful promotion of democracy’ (BMZ 2005, 9), clearly that is no reason for not trying to improve on the situation from here on.

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