

EXCERPTED FROM

Evaluating Democracy Assistance

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ISBNs: 978-1-58826-858-7 hc
978-1-58826-883-9 pb



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This excerpt was downloaded from the
Lynne Rienner Publishers website
www.rienner.com

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Why This Book

Unlike development assistance, results chain of democracy assistance is non-linear and can be obscured by multiple factors and actors at play in the dynamic contexts where our programs take place.

—Kenneth D. Wollack, president of the NDI

I am not convinced if you can evaluate democracy programs. The types of evaluations you do are of little help to us. You should trust the judgment of those who are struggling to promote democracy at great personal risk.

—A Russian democracy activist

During the past two decades, international aid to promote democracy in developing and transition countries has significantly increased.¹ While precise figures are not available, it is estimated to be more than \$3 billion.² The international community increasingly treats democracy assistance on a par with assistance to improve health, education, or economic growth. It now provides assistance to promote human rights, the rule of law, and gender equality. It also assists in developing electoral institutions for competitive elections and gives support for holding free and fair elections. In addition, it gives technical and financial assistance to strengthen civil society, political parties, and independent media, which are essential for the functioning of a democratic society. Finally, the international community assists in improving governance, as it is now recognized that the institutionalization of democracy also depends on the functioning of efficient

and accountable public sector institutions. This book focuses on the monitoring and evaluation of democracy assistance programs.

The underlying premise of the book is that caution is necessary in applying to the democracy domain the evaluation concepts, models, and approaches that have paid rich dividends in the evaluation of development programs. There are significant differences between development and democracy programming. While these differences are of degrees—it is a matter of lighter versus darker gray—they are nonetheless significant and should not be ignored. I will briefly mention them here.

First, most democracy assistance goes to countries that are in a period of political transition or recovering from civil wars and strife. In such countries, the established political order has collapsed, but a new political system is yet to emerge. The political landscape is constantly changing, and there is a great deal of uncertainty about the future with different political forces pulling in different directions. For example, during the Arab Spring, many established authoritarian regimes collapsed, but their future remains uncertain; we do not know what types of political institutions and regimes will evolve in these countries. And yet the international community has to develop democracy interventions to take advantage of political openings. As a result, many democracy programs³ have to be rapidly designed without conducting a thorough assessment of the local conditions and circumstances. Moreover, they are implemented in an era of rapid change and uncertainty. In such conditions, a high probability exists that many targets, indicators, and activities, which were formulated at the launch of an intervention, may not remain relevant.

Second, democracy interventions can affect and unsettle existing power relations and therefore they often are viewed with suspicion, if not hostility, by some governments and entrenched political interests. For example, some ruling parties that want to keep their hold on power at all costs tend to regard free and fair elections as threats to their interests. Although they hold elections and even accept electoral assistance, they do not desist from undermining the integrity of elections by manipulating electoral commissions, denying opposition parties access to government-controlled media, or limiting the access of election monitors to geographical areas that are the stronghold of opposition parties. Similarly, police, entrenched security forces, and other vested interests are typically suspicious of human rights interventions and reluctant to support them. It also is not uncommon that, at

the same time as they publicly praise anticorruption programs, corrupt political leaders, government officials, and their cronies take every opportunity to undermine them. The situation is even worse in semiauthoritarian states that are positively hostile to even modest international programs for training journalists, supporting prosecuted human rights organizations and activists, or helping nascent civil society organizations. In such countries, the organizations or activists receiving small grants from foreign donors are under constant surveillance of the intelligence agencies.

International development assistance, on the other hand, has limited impact on existing political structures at least in the short term. Successful implementation of these programs can enhance rather than undermine the legitimacy and authority of the ruling elites. For example, increased agricultural production and productivity generated by foreign assistance avert the threat of famine and starvation, and assistance to fight HIV/AIDS takes the pressure off government to spend money on that battle. Therefore, programs in agriculture, health, microfinance, or basic education are generally welcomed by the ruling regimes. This is a major difference in the political environment of development and democracy assistance that is often overlooked by policymakers.

Third, as compared to development interventions, the conceptual models that underlie democracy interventions have weaker empirical and theoretical foundations. The international community often finances awareness programs to mobilize public opinion against corruption. Yet there is no solid empirical evidence that such efforts have any lasting influence on public policies, much less on the prevalence of corruption. It also invests heavily in nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that support democracy, but there is little hard evidence on the sustainability of the assisted NGOs or their impacts on strengthening democracy. One obvious explanation is that, as compared to development assistance, the field of democracy assistance is relatively new. The development community has more than a half-century of experience in designing, implementing, monitoring, and evaluating development programs and policies while democracy assistance is barely thirty years old and has not accumulated the rich programming experience. The situation is improving, however. To cite an example, the knowledge of electoral assistance has vastly improved as a result of past experience so that the international community now has quite sophisticated models, intervention strategies,

and analytical tools to design and implement electoral assistance projects and programs.

Fourth, it is more difficult to establish a causal relationship between an intervention and the observed changes in democracy interventions than in most development programs. One can be certain that immunization will prevent the occurrence of a particular disease and, therefore, if a major immunization initiative is launched in a country, it will reduce the incidence of the disease. Agricultural experts know that the introduction of a high-yielding variety of seeds with assured supply of agricultural inputs in a stable economic environment will increase agricultural production and productivity. But no such relationship can be established in most democracy promotion programs. We cannot be certain if assistance to civil society in a transition country will contribute to its enhanced role in promoting democracy or if human rights training of security officials will result in fewer human rights violations. Many long-term outcomes of democracy interventions tend to remain what Jonathan Morell (2005) calls “unforeseen” and “unforeseeable.” Unforeseen consequences arise because of the paucity of knowledge and/or the failure to take advantage of the existing knowledge while unforeseeable consequences can be attributed to the uncertainties of the changing, dynamic environment, which cannot be predicted by the social science community in advance. Many democracy interventions have ripple effects that were not anticipated by their designers. For example, media interventions undertaken in the Balkans to promote social reconciliation among conflicting parties helped to institutionalize independent media outlets. And anecdotal experience indicates that some alumni of democracy projects funded by the United States have participated in the recent uprisings in the Middle East. As a result of ongoing empirically grounded evaluations and academic research, designers of democracy programs in the future will be in a better position to anticipate what are at present unforeseen consequences.

The case of unforeseeable consequences is undoubtedly different. These arise because the long-term outcomes of democracy interventions cannot always be predicted. A wide variety of factors, forces, and unpredictable events as well as their constant interactions in a changing environment affect the outcomes of democracy interventions. For example, the international community has been providing significant assistance to build and strengthen democratic institutions in Afghanistan, but the future of democracy in that troubled country remains in question. We do not know what kinds of political compromises will

take place, how the Islamist ideology will affect its emerging political culture, and what will be the shape of its political institutions. If the past is a guide, social scientists are not very good at predicting long-term political changes or events. Despite the huge investments in sophisticated models based on empirical data, the US intelligence services and the academic community conspicuously failed to predict the fall of the Soviet Union, the disintegration in the Balkans, or the uprisings in the Middle East in 2011 and 2012. The situation, on the other hand, is much better in many fields of development assistance. Demographers can estimate the likely impact of family planning interventions on birth rates and economists can approximate the effects of agricultural interventions on agricultural production and productivity.

Finally, the primary focus of democracy assistance tends to be on institution building rather than service delivery. Programs are designed to strengthen civil society organizations, electoral commissions, election monitoring organizations, and independent media outlets. Institution building is a complex process and it is difficult to develop reliable and valid measures for evaluating the effects of assistance. The impacts of assistance are not always visible and can be captured only in the long term, if at all.

The above-mentioned differences between development and democracy programming have implications for the planning, conducting, monitoring, and evaluation of democracy programs. They indicate the need for a nuanced approach in applying evaluation concepts, approaches, and tools to the domain of democracy assistance. And this book attempts to articulate a nuanced approach.

The book presents a comprehensive discussion of the issues surrounding the planning, conducting, and managing of evaluations of interventions. It is designed to provide conceptual clarity about key evaluation constructs; outline steps that are essential for establishing sound and flexible evaluation and monitoring systems; explore the use and misuse of indicators in the monitoring and evaluation of democracy interventions; explain the various designs that can be used for evaluating democracy initiatives, programs, and policies, including their relative strengths and limitations and the type of the data collection methods that they require; suggest ways for formulating evaluation recommendations and communicating them to policymakers and decisionmakers; promote accountability and learning; and encourage critical reflection about the effectiveness and impacts of democracy interventions.

Chapter 2 explains the meaning of evaluations, their different dimensions, and the rationale for conducting democracy evaluations. Chapter 3 focuses on democracy indicators and examines their nature, strengths, limitations, and use. It looks at three categories of indicators: micro (performance and outcome), meso (sector specific), and macro levels. Chapter 4 discusses the meaning of monitoring, identifies the requirements for effective monitoring systems, and explains the steps in developing realistic monitoring for democracy interventions. Chapter 5 presents an overview of the evaluation process and suggests appropriate roles for evaluation managers. Chapter 6 focuses on experimental and quasi-experimental evaluation designs and explains the reasons why these designs cannot be widely used in multifaceted, long-term democracy evaluations. Chapter 7 discusses three other designs (pre- and posttest, cross-sectional, and case study designs) and mentions their relative strengths and limitations. Chapter 8 explains the distinction between qualitative and quantitative methods and then discusses seven specific methods: surveys, structured direct observation, secondary data analysis, document reviews, focus group discussions, key informant interviews, and group interviews. Chapter 9 focuses on communicating the findings and recommendations of democracy evaluations to stakeholders and the public. The final chapter makes a set of recommendations for the future.

Notes

1. There is often confusion between democracy promotion and democracy assistance. *Democracy assistance* is a subset of democracy promotion that, in addition to aid, includes a wide range of policy instruments such as diplomatic pressure, economic and political sanctions, incentives to join a wider union (e.g., the European Union), and even use of force under certain circumstances to foster and strengthen democratic institutions, procedures, and culture. A distinct advantage of democracy assistance is that it is relatively less threatening than, say, economic sanctions or intense diplomatic pressure to introduce political reforms. Its purpose is not to impose democracy, but to give a helping hand to those who are struggling to establish a more open, pluralistic political order. It is targeted to governmental organizations, civil society institutions, private sector firms, and even selected leaders and activists.

2. The United States budgeted more than \$3.6 billion for FY 2010/11.

3. Although the meanings of the terms *project* and *programs* are different (please see the glossary in Appendix 2), in this book I often use the terms interchangeably.