



## IMPROVING DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE Building Knowledge through Evaluations and Research (2008)

Over the past 25 years, the United States has made support for the spread of democracy to other nations an increasingly important element of its national security policy. Within the U.S. government, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) has principal responsibility for providing democracy assistance. Despite expenditures estimated at \$8.47 billion between 1990 and 2005 in approximately 120 countries, our understanding of the actual impacts of USAID democracy and governance (DG) assistance remains limited, and is the subject of much current debate in the policy and scholarly communities.

In 2000 USAID created the Strategic and Operational Research Agenda (SORA) to gain a greater understanding of what works and what does not in DG assistance. Two SORA-sponsored quantitative studies have shown that, on average, higher levels of democratic assistance are associated with movement to higher levels of democracy, providing the clearest empirical evidence to date that democracy assistance contributes toward its desired goals. Yet, it is also true that large volumes of democracy assistance do not always yield positive results. To better understand why DG assistance has been more successful in some contexts than in others, SORA turned to an expert committee of the National Research Council (NRC) to gain greater insight into which democracy assistance projects are having the greatest impacts. This report provides a road map to enable USAID and its partners to build, absorb, and act on improved knowledge about assisting the development of democracy and good governance in a variety of contexts.

### OVERALL CONCLUSION

The goal of USAID should not be incremental improvement of its project evaluations or funding additional studies of past activities, but instead to build the capacity to generate, absorb, and disseminate knowledge regarding democracy assistance and its effects. This will necessarily involve

- (1) Gaining experience with varied impact evaluation designs, including randomized studies, to ascertain how useful they could be for determining the effects of DG projects;
- (2) Focusing on disaggregated, sectoral-level measures to track democratic change;
- (3) Expanding the diversity of case studies that are used to inform DG planning; and
- (4) Adopting mechanisms and activities to support the active engagement of DG staff and mission personnel with the results of research and evaluations of democratization and DG assistance.

## OVERALL RESEARCH AND ANALYTIC DESIGN

The committee unanimously recommends a four-part strategy for gaining increased knowledge to support USAID's DG policy planning and programming.

**RECOMMENDATION 1: *Undertake a pilot program of impact evaluations designed to demonstrate whether such evaluations can help USAID determine the effects of its DG projects on targeted policy-relevant outcomes.***

A portion of these impact evaluations should use randomized designs since, where applicable and feasible, they are the designs most likely to lead to reliable and valid results in determining project effects and because their use in DG projects has been limited. The committee recognizes there is substantial skepticism about whether impact evaluations can be applied to DG projects, another reason for beginning with carefully designed and monitored pilot studies. The pilot evaluations should not supplant current evaluations and assessments, but impact evaluations could gradually become a more important part of USAID's portfolio of monitoring and evaluation (M&E) activities as the agency gains experience with such evaluations and determines their value.

### Strategies for Implementation

- USAID should begin the pilot program by focusing on a few widely used DG program categories, and expand the use of such impact evaluations as warranted by the results of those pilot evaluations and the needs expressed by USAID mission directors.
- Moreover, the committee recommends that these pilot evaluations be undertaken as part of a DG evaluation initiative with senior leadership that will also focus on improving USAID's capacity to undertake impact evaluations and make resources and expertise available to mission directors seeking to learn about and apply impact evaluations to their projects.

**RECOMMENDATION 2: *Develop more transparent, objective, and widely accepted indicators of changes in democratic behavior and institutions at the sectoral level—that is, at the level of such sectors as the rule of law, civil society, government accountability, effective local government, and quality of elections.***

Current aggregate national indicators of democracy, such as Freedom House or Polity scores, are neither at the right level for identifying the impacts of particular USAID DG projects nor accurate and consistent enough to track modest or short-term movements of countries toward or away from greater levels of democracy.

### Strategy for Implementation

- USAID and other policymakers should explore making a substantial investment in the systematic collection of democracy indicators at a disaggregated sectoral level—focused on the components of democracy rather than (or in addition to) the overall concept. In order to have access to data on democracy and democratization comparable to the data available to policymakers and foreign assistance agencies in the areas of public health or trade and finance, a substantial government or multilateral effort to improve, develop, and maintain international data on levels and detailed aspects of democracy would be needed. This should involve multiple agencies and actors in efforts to initially develop a widely accepted set of sectoral data on democracy and democratic development and seek to institutionalize the collection and updating of democracy data for a broad clientele, along the lines of the economic, demographic, and trade data collected by the World Bank, the United Nations, and the International Monetary Fund.

**RECOMMENDATION 3: *Use more diverse and theoretically structured clusters of case studies of democratization and democracy assistance to develop hypotheses to guide democracy assistance planning in a diverse range of settings.***

Whether USAID chooses to support such studies or gathers them from ongoing academic research, it is important to look at how democracy assistance functions in a range of different initial conditions and trajectories of political change. Such case studies should seek to map out long-term trajectories of political change and to place democracy assistance in the context of national and international factors affecting those trajectories, rather than focus mainly on specific democracy assistance programs.

**Strategies for Implementation**

- If USAID decides to invest in supporting case study research, the committee recommends using a competitive proposal solicitation process to elicit the best designs. USAID should not specify a precise case study design, but instead should specify key criteria that proposals must meet. These should include (1) the criteria for choosing cases should be explicit and theoretically driven; (2) the cases should include a variety of initial conditions or contexts in which USAID DG projects operate; (3) the cases should include at least one, if not several, countries in which USAID and other donors have made little or no investment in DG projects; and (4) the cases should include countries with varied outcomes regarding democratic progress or stabilization.
- In addition to case studies, a variety of other research methods, both formal and informal (including systematic debriefings of USAID field officers and overseas staff, statistical analyses of international data, and surveys) can shed light on patterns of democratization as well as how DG projects actually operate in the field and how they are received. USAID should include these varied sources of information as part of the regular organizational learning activities the committee recommends next.

**RECOMMENDATION 4: *Rebuild USAID's institutional mechanisms for absorbing and disseminating the results of its work and evaluations, as well as its own research and the research of others, on processes of democratization and democracy assistance.***

In recent years, USAID has lost much of its capacity to assess the impact and effectiveness of its programs. Without an active program of organizational learning so that senior personnel and DG officers have structured opportunities to discuss the results of pilot evaluations, compare their experiences with DG programs, and discuss the research carried out by USAID and especially other scholars, implementers, and donors, the fruits of the committee's first three recommendations will not be usefully integrated with the experience of DG officers in a way that will improve DG program planning, design, and outcomes.

**Strategy for Implementation**

- Rebuilding organizational learning capacity within USAID will require a number of steps, some minor and some potentially involving major shifts in contracting and management procedures. The committee thus recommends that a **DG Evaluation Initiative** (described in detail in the full report) be led by a senior policymaker or official within USAID who will have the ability to recommend agency-wide changes, as many of the obstacles to improved learning about DG programs stem from agency-wide procedures and organizational characteristics. While in some ways this will replace the capabilities lost with the elimination of the Center for Development Information and Evaluation (CDIE), in other ways the committee hopes the new initiative will go beyond that.

## STUDY PROCESS INCLUDED IN-DEPTH AND IN-COUNTRY INVESTIGATIONS

*Assessments of the current state of academic literature on democratization found that:*

- § The literature is highly contested
- § Attention to the process and impacts of democracy assistance in academic research emerged relatively recently
- § Practical problems encountered by USAID, other donors, and implementers raise new issues related to best practices of democracy assistance

**à It was impossible simply to draw on current academic research to answer the committee's charge.**

*Surveys of existing research and a workshop of experts on democracy and governance indicators found that:*

- § There is no way to utilize existing macro-level indicators in a way that provides sound policy guidance or reliably tracks modest or short-term changes in a country's democratic status.
- § USAID and its implementers have already compiled an extensive collection of policy-relevant indicators to track specific outcomes and changes that can provide the basis for evaluation the impact of DG projects.

**à Sectoral-level indicators are more effective for tracking and assessing the effectiveness of USAID's programs.**

*Field visits in Albania, Peru and Uganda were conducted to:*

- § Hold in-depth discussions with USAID officers, practitioners, and local partners to understand the conditions on the ground
- § Meet with Mission and Embassy staff to understand realistic opportunities, obstacles and perceived objections to improving monitoring and evaluation of DG projects.

**à While the concerns regarding more rigorous evaluations are valid, and serious obstacles exist, field teams concluded that many of the proposals for more rigorous monitoring and evaluation are in principle feasible in the field.**

## COMMITTEE ON THE EVALUATION OF USAID DEMOCRACY ASSISTANCE PROGRAMS

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### For More Information

Copies of *Improving Democracy Assistance: Building Knowledge through Evaluations and Research* are available from the National Academies Press; call (800) 624-6242 or (202) 334-3313 (in the Washington metropolitan area), or visit the NAP Web site at [www.nap.edu](http://www.nap.edu). For more information concerning this project, contact Jo Husbands at (202) 334-2611 or [jhusband@nas.edu](mailto:jhusband@nas.edu) or visit the Policy and Global Affairs Web site at [www.nationalacademies.org/pgs](http://www.nationalacademies.org/pgs).