



ADVANCING DEMOCRACY

In this era of unparalleled political change, scores of nations are making the transition from repressive, autocratic regimes to democratic governance. USAID is at the forefront of this wave, helping countries build democratic institutions and strengthen the societal underpinnings essential to their success. The agency is helping guide individuals and their leaders toward open, representative government. During the last year, USAID was able to support historic democratic breakthroughs in Haiti, South Africa, Cambodia and the West Bank and Gaza.

In 1980, there were 55 democratic nations. By 1995, this number had jumped to a remarkable 115 nations. USAID provided democracy and governance assistance to 36 of the 57 nations that successfully made the transition to open government during this period. Democratic countries are less likely to engage in war, generate large refugee flows or disintegrate into crises. Democracies also provide more stable markets for U.S. exports and U.S. investment and business abroad.

USAID assistance in democracy and governance is relatively new. Whereas other sectors rely on decades of research and information collection, in democracy and governance USAID is helping define the boundaries of assistance and methods for determining the impact of assistance. Given the incremental, complex and non-linear nature of political change, the agency faces considerable challenges in measuring the success of democratization programs.

To maximize progress toward achieving the agency goal of building sustainable democracies, and in light of limited resources, USAID programs are targeted in four priority areas. Their objectives are: strengthening the rule of law and respect for human rights; fostering genuine and

competitive political systems; increasing development of politically active civil societies; and promoting more transparent and accountable government institutions.

Strengthening the Rule of Law and Respect for Human Rights

The rule of law is the foundation upon which democratic societies are built. The rule of law protects citizens against arbitrary use of state authority and against the lawless acts of other citizens. It ensures that all citizens are treated fairly and are given equal opportunity under the law. Internationally recognized human rights provide a framework for citizens to interact with each other and with the state.

USAID uses several approaches to strengthen the rule of law: ensuring legal protection of citizens' rights and interests; enhancing fairness of the administration of justice; improving timeliness of the administration of justice; and increasing citizen pressure for conformity with international human rights standards. For example, in South Africa USAID supported the South Africa Legal Defense Fund, whose attorneys handled cases involving women's right to inherit property and complex constitutional law issues, such as the right to bail and use of racial classifications.

In 1993, Honduran public prosecutors presented fewer than 700 criminal cases to tribunals, none involving public corruption. With USAID assistance, the Honduran attorney general's office was created. During 1995, more than 12,000 criminal prosecutions have been presented around the country. For the first time in the history of Honduras, corruption

USAID is helping define the boundaries of assistance and methods for determining the impact of assistance.

charges have been pressed against 73 high- and mid-level government officials, including national and local political officials.

Fostering Genuine and Competitive Political Systems

USAID plays an important role in helping to ensure free and fair electoral contests and to enhance political competition. When elections are manipulated, poorly managed or held only after lengthy and unpredictable intervals, participation, competition and the will of citizens are all compromised. USAID's approaches to achieving this objective include: creating impartial and open electoral laws and regulations; creating impartial and more effective electoral administration; better informing voters; improving local and international monitoring; and making political parties more responsive to constituents.

In Thailand, USAID's Women in Politics Program provided political party training to more than 1,000 women in five northern provinces before the 1995 local elections. Of the 289 women who ran, two-thirds had received training, and 109 were elected. The number of women holding office in these provinces increased from an average of 1 percent before the elections to 14 percent afterward.

As evidenced in the seriously flawed 1994 Dominican election, monitors alone do not ensure free and fair elections. In preparation for these elections, USAID provided technical assistance to the election commission and funded election observation. However, the election itself did not mark the completion of USAID's role in the process. Following the elections, the election commission properly instigated an investigation into the irregularities but then ignored the report's findings. USAID supported Dominican civil organizations calling for the introduction of a political accord limiting the president's four-year term and precluding presidential re-election. The Dominican Congress passed the accord, with some modifications, and new presidential elections are scheduled for May 1996.

Increasing Politically Active Civil Societies

A strong civil society is crucial to democracy. "Civil society" is the broad term given to the interaction of voluntary groups of all sorts; it inhabits the area between individuals and the state. Non-governmental organizations constitute a vital channel for sharing information and for formulating and representing specific interests. Their collective nature helps ensure that their members' interests are weighed by policy-making bodies. In addition, collective action helps protect individual members from arbitrary and capricious governmental retaliation.

With their assorted political interests, organizations monitor government performance and create strong pressure for accountability. They inculcate democratic values, giving people practice in democratic principles and creating opportunities for new leaders to rise. USAID programs strengthen civil society organizations engaged in or having the potential for championing adoption and consolidation of democratic governance reforms.

USAID has been working in the Philippines over the last two years with agricultural groups to encourage policy analysis of important issues within the agriculture community. When a draft executive order on tariffs was released that would have given special incentives to a few industrialists and increased packaging costs for most farmers, groups representing the interests of small farmers that had been trained by USAID helped modify the executive order. What emerged was a consensus on agricultural policies that will make Filipino farmers more competitive in the market emerging as a result of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade.

USAID's media program in Zambia also has had wide-reaching impact. Open and critical discussion of politicians and policies is now common in Zambia's media. Private sector journalists now account for 45 percent of working journalists, up from 24 percent in 1993. In addition, the state monopoly on electronic media was broken in December 1994 when Zambia's first privately owned radio station began broadcasting. Six additional private licenses are now pending.

USAID plays an important role in helping to ensure free and fair electoral contests and to enhance political competition.

Elections in the West Bank and Gaza

The January 1996 elections in the West Bank and Gaza marked an important step forward, not only toward democracy, but toward a successful peace process.

Despite calls by more extremist elements of Palestinian society to boycott the vote, turnout was impressively high. A large and diverse slate of nearly 700 candidates competed for 88 legislative seats.

A highly respected institution, the Center for Palestinian Research Studies, polled Palestinians over the last year and did election polling before the election. When asked in November 1994 whether they supported acts of violence against Israel, 57 percent of Palestinians said they did. As the election approached, by September 1995 only 18 percent supported violence. Further, 85 percent of Palestinians

said they would vote for candidates supportive of the peace process.

The USAID program in the West Bank and Gaza has provided critical support for the peace process by addressing both the immediate needs of Palestinians and longer-term development efforts. Behind the successful election was an intensive multiyear effort by the Palestinian authorities, the U.S. government, a

host of local and international non-governmental organizations and concerned citizens to strengthen the civic fabric of the West Bank and Gaza. With USAID support, civic education programs in the West Bank and Gaza that targeted women, former political prisoners, youth and the rural population were carried out.

More Transparent and Accountable Government Institutions

The behavior of government officials can support or undermine development and democracy. Strengthening performance, respecting ethical standards, consulting broadly to ascertain citizen interests, sharing information and acting in an open manner, diffusing power by sharing decision-making with local government — all these help ensure that government decision-making is impartial and informed. Such behavior supports the long-term sustainability of political institutions and people's confidence in democratic principles.

USAID programs support the development of more transparent and accountable government by using the following approaches: increasing local government participation; increasing citizen access to government information; strengthening mechanisms to promote ethical standards in government; increasing civilian control over military and police forces; and strengthening the effectiveness and independence of legislatures.

The agency is widely increasing local government participation in democratic societies. With USAID support, the government of the Philippines enacted one of the most far-reaching and ambitious decentralization programs in the world. However, few communities were adequately prepared for the responsibilities that accompanied the decentralization. USAID's local governance program responded across the board with great success. The agency's efforts to improve the public administration capabilities

of local government units in the Philippines have resulted, since 1991, in an 80 percent increase in local revenue collection.

Paraguay provides another success story. To transfer municipal management lessons learned in the United States to Latin America, USAID developed a program for city-to-city contacts. This program matched the governments of Asuncion and Metro Dade County in Florida. Through several exchanges, the mayor of Asuncion was convinced of the usefulness of public hearings. Not only does 1995 mark the first time that public budget hearings were held in Asuncion, these forums allowed for meaningful public participation. Fifty proposals presented by the attending citizens were adopted.

Future Challenges

USAID has expanded democracy, the rights of citizens and the quality of governance. However, more progress remains to be made. It will remain vital for a number of nations to strengthen their economies as a means to solidify democratic gains and bring tangible benefits from open governance to their citizens. Continued assistance will be needed to maintain and build on the progress that has been made in consolidating democracy; completing transitions to freely, fairly and competitively elected national governments; and initiating the transition process in key countries suffering from significant internal instability.

To transfer municipal management lessons learned in the United States to Latin America, USAID developed a program for city-to-city contacts.