

# DEMOCRACY NEEDS STRENGTHENING EVERYWHERE

Opportunities for consolidating  
democracy in Finland's external  
relations and development policy

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DEVELOPMENT  
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## Summary

In this report, the expert group of the Development Policy Committee (DPC) analyses the global state of democracy and civil society and Finland's support for strengthening democracy and civil society. The report also makes recommendations on what Finland can do to strengthen democracy globally in its development policy and other areas of external relations.

After a long period of positive democratic development, the trend has gone into reverse and in a situation of uncertainty democracy can be undermined anywhere in the world. Changing this worrying trend will require a more determined approach from Finland. The main conclusion of the report is that Finland needs to be more active in the defence of democracy, both nationally and internationally.

At the policy and declaratory level, Finland is firmly committed to the promotion of democracy worldwide. It emphasises a broad concept of democracy, including, in particular, the participation of various vulnerable groups, equality and, above all, human rights. However, democracy has not been a particularly high priority in Finnish development policy, but the recent rapid decline of democracy has prompted reflection on how to strengthen democracy work and respond to the current state of democracy. Like many other countries, Finland now has to assess the changes in the global environment and, consequently, the forms of its own support.

The report emphasises that support for democracy must always be seen as a totality, in which the state of democratic institutions, civil society and the rule of law interact. The situation in the country as a whole should always be taken into account when deciding how to target democracy support. Strengthening democracy requires a variety of approaches and methods for different situations. Existing development policy instruments were designed for conditions of democratic consolidation or to support

transitions from authoritarian to democratic environments. But the same mechanisms work much less well in conditions of democratic decline. Different situations therefore require more nuanced approaches.

The main recommendation of the report is that Finland should place more emphasis on supporting democracy in its development policy. This is worthwhile because, at its best, such support can foster a positive dynamic in which the elements that strengthen democracy are mutually reinforcing.

Promoting democracy requires strengthening the link, coherence and strategic nature of democracy and human rights work, as well as developing expertise in foreign policy administration. In addition, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs should make democracy promotion and the state of civil society more visible in all aspects of foreign and security policy, international economic relations, development policy and international influence. The expansion of civil society should also be pursued as a separate objective. The call in the 2023 Government Programme for a reduction in the number of country programmes should also be carefully considered from the perspective of democracy, human rights and the development of the rule of law. In its work to strengthen democracy, Finland should also continue to promote gender equality and non-discrimination in developing countries.

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## Introduction

This report by the expert working group of the Development Policy Committee (DPC) examines the global state of democracy and civil society, Finland's current support for bolstering democracy and civil society, and highlights questions related to these issues. The report ends with our recommendations for boosting democracy in Finland's external relations and in conducting development policy. We particularly want to stimulate the interest of members of parliament in this issue and to ensure the sustainability of democracy work by the Ministry for Foreign Affairs (MFA) alongside that of human rights and the rule of law.

There has recently been an increasing realisation that preserving the democracy we have achieved cannot be taken for granted. Following decades of democracy being consolidated worldwide, the trend has gone into reverse. In recent years, Finland has paid laudable attention to issues of democracy at the national level. In the 2010s, civil society and participatory processes were supported through a specific policy programme<sup>1</sup>. Under the previous government, a national democracy programme was carried out, coordinated by the Ministry of Justice<sup>2</sup>. Such processes remind us that the state of democracy and civil society is not only a problem for developing countries but needs to be addressed everywhere.

On the other hand, Finland should also consider itself a global player in this sphere. The Government Resolution on Finnish Democracy Policy in the 2020s states that in an unstable international situation, it is more important than ever to defend a well-functioning democratic system at both the national and international levels. Development policy, alongside diplomacy, is a key area for this work.

1 Perälä, E. (2015). Kansalaiset demokratiaa vai demokratia kansalaisia varten? Suomen demokratia politiikka poliittisen osallistumisen edistäjänä 2000-luvulla (Citizens for democracy or democracy for citizens? Finland's democracy policy in the 21st century. In Finnish). University of Helsinki, Department of Political and Economic Studies.

2 <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/hanke?tunnus=OM036:00/2019> (In Finnish)

Concerns about the global deterioration of democracy also have a major impact on Finland's development policy. Countries that safeguard their democratic institutions face the difficult question of how to deal with deteriorating democracies in their bilateral relations. Finland, like many other countries, will have to assess changes in the global environment and, as a result, the forms of its own support, the stated or unstated assumptions that influence its actions and, more broadly, its theory of change.

Democracy and civil society are treated in this context and as part of the same whole. This approach emphasises a broad interpretation of democracy. Such a conception of democracy assumes that for the realisation of democracy, a functioning electoral democracy, meaning genuine elections and the corresponding change of power, are insufficient. Moreover, a functioning democracy includes the possibility of continuous critical participation. Functional democracy requires a functional civil society.

This publication continues the series of DPC publications in which we have previously discussed the state of the human rights-based approach to Finnish development policy and the challenges and potential of digitalisation in development policy and for this reason, these topics are not covered more extensively in this report.<sup>3</sup>

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3 Development Policy Committee (2023) A human rights based approach to Finnish development policy: Tense times demand a more ambitious direction <https://www.kehityspoliittintoimikunta.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2023/04/a-human-rights-based-approach-to-finnish-development-policy-3.pdf>; Development Policy Committee (2023b) How to bridge the digital divide in a sustainable and equitable way? Development policy perspectives on the digitalisation of learning and work. (In Finnish) [https://www.kehityspoliittintoimikunta.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2023/05/kpt\\_kuinka\\_kuroa\\_umpeen\\_digikuilua\\_kestavasti\\_ja\\_yhdenvertaisesti.pdf](https://www.kehityspoliittintoimikunta.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2023/05/kpt_kuinka_kuroa_umpeen_digikuilua_kestavasti_ja_yhdenvertaisesti.pdf); Nikulainen, Elina (2023) Women's rights defenders in a digitalising world: an emerging development policy issue. (In Finnish) Development Policy Committee publications 2023:2. Helsinki: KPT. [https://www.kehityspoliittintoimikunta.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2023/03/kpt\\_digitalisaatio-ja-naisihmisoikeuspuolustajat\\_pdf.pdf](https://www.kehityspoliittintoimikunta.fi/wp-content/uploads/sites/27/2023/03/kpt_digitalisaatio-ja-naisihmisoikeuspuolustajat_pdf.pdf)

# 1. The state of democracy

## Definitions of democracy

For all the talk of democracy, there is no consensus on its definition or even its scope. A rough distinction can be made between a narrow and a broad definition. In the narrow sense, democracy refers to the functioning of democratic institutions. This includes, in particular, transparent and fair elections, the associated change of power, and an independent judiciary. A functioning democracy also requires functioning parliaments, legislative processes, and open and inclusive political parties. Democratic institutions often include administrative transparency and a functioning multi-party system. Some theories of democracy place more emphasis on open competition for voter popularity<sup>4</sup>, others on equal and fair representation of different interests and other groups<sup>5</sup>. Liberal concepts of democracy also emphasise the principle of legality and the neutrality of government: government should treat different preferences, perceptions and world views equally.

In a broader sense, democracy means a wider pluralist space for critical evaluation and participation, and the principle of political equality. Seen in this way, democracy is not just a technical or institutional matter, but is linked to a more general culture of participation. If democracy is understood as the equal capacity to make free and informed choices, it requires not only well-functioning electoral, judicial and administrative institutions, but also a free media, a school system that teaches critical social skills, and a free and participatory civil society. It is also sometimes seen as an element of democracy in terms of 'civic competence', the ability to evaluate policies critically and rationally and to understand one's own influence. Democracy as we understand it happens every day in society.

4 Dahl, R.A. (1971). *Polyarchy: participation and opposition*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

5 Alonso, S., Keane, J. & Merkel, W. (toim.) (2011). *The future of representative democracy*. Cambridge University Press.

The core value of democracy is equality, which must be reflected in both representative and non-representative processes.<sup>6</sup> This is why social inequality is also a danger to democracy. Democracy requires equality and a broad understanding of non-discrimination. Gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation or similar factors should not be a barrier to participation. Equality must be ensured, especially where the roles of minorities overlap. Similarly, legislation and cultural perceptions can create barriers to equal involvement. Economic inequalities are also reflected in inequalities in participation.

The contrast between a narrow and a broad conception of democracy is, of course, to some extent artificial. Legislative and electoral institutions, a transparent rule of law and civil society are mutually reinforcing and interdependent. In particular, there is a strong interplay between democracy and civil society: civil society supports and strengthens democracy in concrete terms and equips people to have a say. When necessary, civil society also expresses resistance, which is essential for the functioning of institutions: without 'watchdogs', democratic institutions regress. Sometimes, the line between democratic politics and civil society is difficult to draw, for example in the case of large and inclusive popular parties.

Several definitions of democracy combine a narrow and a broad understanding. The definition of democracy offered by the International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance's (International IDEA) emphasises not only the ability of citizens to change power, but also political equality and equal opportunities for citizens<sup>7</sup>.

In the research literature, democracy has been defined as, for example, a combination of political freedom and political equality<sup>8</sup> and a system of governance in which leaders are publicly accountable to the public<sup>9</sup>.

A narrow understanding of democracy is easier to monitor with quantitative measures and indicators. When it comes to providing unambiguous information on the state and development of

6 Finnish Government (2022). Government Resolution on Finnish Democracy Policy in the 2020s. [Summary in English] Publications of the Ministry of Justice, Memorandums and Statements 2022:40. Helsinki: Ministry of Justice, p. 30

7 International IDEA. (2022). Global state of democracy report 2022. Forging social contracts in a time of discontent. <https://www.idea.int/democracytracker/sites/default/files/2022-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2022.pdf>

8 Gerardo L. Munck (2016) What is democracy? A reconceptualization of the quality of democracy. *Democratization* 23:1, 1-26.

9 Philippe C. Schmitter, Terry Lynn Karl (1991) What Democracy Is... and Is Not. *Journal of Democracy* 2:3, 75-88

democracy or assessing the effectiveness of interventions, it is tempting to focus on a narrow institutional definition. However, there is a risk of overlooking citizens' capacities and opportunities for participation and the role of various minorities. On the other hand, a functioning democracy always requires a functioning party and parliamentary system, and it is also important to monitor developments in the institutional core of democracy.

## The links between democracy and other forms of development

Democracy has been analysed both as a value in itself and as a means to other ends. Whatever the emphasis on the definition of democracy, the links between democracy and free civil society and many development objectives are strong. Democratic societies are also better able to uphold the protection of human rights.

In democratic societies, well-being tends to be stronger for the simple reason that people have greater opportunities to influence their living conditions and, if necessary, to express their dissatisfaction. In 1981, Nobel Prize-winning economist Amartya Sen said that democracy and a free press were good ways to prevent famine<sup>10</sup>. In "The Case for Democracy"<sup>11</sup> published by the V-Dem Institute at the University of Gothenburg, democratisation is linked to faster economic growth and also to a kind of collective economic safety net: authoritarian states are more likely to experience economic collapse.

In addition, democratisation would appear to increase funding for social protection and social sector programmes, although evidence of increased economic equality is less clear. Indeed, some studies have asked how to ensure that democracy also provides development for the poorest<sup>12</sup>. Basic services and infrastructure (such as access to clean drinking water, electricity, roads) also seem to be better on average in democracies<sup>13</sup>.

Democracy also appears to be linked to better health and longer life expectancy<sup>14</sup>. In particular, infant mortality rates are significantly lower in democracies. Education, especially primary education, shows similar positive associations<sup>15</sup>. Democratic countries also seem to have higher levels of political equality in terms of the proportion of women in key political positions<sup>16</sup>. Ambitious climate policies also seem more likely in

10 Sen, A. (1981). *Poverty and famines. An essay on entitlement and deprivation*. Oxford: Clarendon press.

11 V-dem institute (2023a) *Case for democracy report*. [https://v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport\\_230421.pdf](https://v-dem.net/documents/34/C4DReport_230421.pdf)

12 Bangura, Y. (2015). *Development, Democracy and Cohesion: Critical Essays with Insights on Sierra Leone and Wider African Contexts*. Sierra Leonean Writers Series, Warima/Freetown/Accra.

13 V-dem institute 2023a, p.5

14 Wang, Y, Mechkova, V. & Andersson, F. (2019) Does Democracy Enhance Health? *New Empirical Evidence 1900–2012*. *Political research quarterly*, 72(3), pp. 554–569

15 Dahlum, S. & Knutsen, C.H. (2017). Do Democracies Provide Better Education? *Revisiting the Democracy–Human Capital Link*. *World development* 94, pp. 186–199.

16 Zagrebina, A. (2020). Concepts of democracy in democratic and nondemocratic countries. *International political science review* 41 (2), pp. 174–191.

democracies<sup>17</sup>.

According to the theory of democratic peace, democratic states hardly ever go to war with each other<sup>18</sup>. This has been explained as a result of factors such as the culture of peaceful conflict resolution and the decentralisation of power<sup>19</sup>. Of course, this is more of a hypothesis than an actual theory, but it seems to have some passable explanatory power.

From this perspective, it is reasonable to think that while democracy should be seen as an end in itself, supporting democracy is also an important tool for supporting other forms of development<sup>20</sup>. However, the cause-and-effect relationship between democracy and other positive developments is not straightforward<sup>21</sup>. While economic equality has been estimated to lead to more stable democracies<sup>22</sup>, it is uncertain whether democracy generates economic growth or whether economic growth generates the consolidation and deepening of democracy<sup>23</sup>. Similarly, the rise in educational attainment can be judged to be a cause rather than a consequence of democratisation: education produces a population with the capacity to monitor, evaluate and hold their elected leaders to account. The question of cause and effect is not only an academic problem but also an important one for development policy in considering where it makes most sense to intervene.

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*While democracy should be seen as an end in itself, supporting democracy is also an important tool for supporting other forms of development.*

17 E.g. Vegard Tørstad, Håkon Sælen & Live Standal Bøyum (2020) The domestic politics of international climate commitments: which factors explain cross-country variation in NDC ambition? *Environmental Research Letters* 15 (2).

18 Hook, S. W. & Nelson, T. (2015). Introduction: Democratic Peace Theory. Teoksessa S. W. Hook, *Democratic Peace in Theory and Practice*. The Kent State University Press, s. 1-16.

19 Russett, B. (1993). *Grasping the Democratic Peace: Principles for a Post-Cold War World*. Princeton University Press.

20 Bishop, M.L. (2016). Democracy and development: a relationship of harmony or tension? Teoksessa Grugel, J. & Hammett, D. (eds.) *The Palgrave Handbook of International Development*. Lontoo: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.77-98. Doo-renspleet, R. 2018. Rethinking the value of democracy: a comparative perspective. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91656-9\\_6](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91656-9_6).

21 Niño-Zarazúa, M., Gisselquist, R.M., Horigoshi, A., Samarin, M. & Sen, K. (2020). Effects of Swedish and international democracy aid. EBA Report 2020:07.

22 Boix, C. (2003). *Democracy and redistribution*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press.

23 For an argument on the latter, see Diamond, L. (1999). *Developing democracy: toward consolidation*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.

## Assessing the state of democracy

The state of democracy and civil society around the world is monitored by numerous research institutes, think tanks and international organisations. These actors monitor global trends in democratic change, usually using quantitative indicators. Such methodologies seek to identify different aspects or elements of democracy and to monitor the evolution of different dimensions of democracy from country to country.

For example, the International IDEA defines the state of democracy on the basis of four categories, which are further divided into sub-categories. The main categories are political representation (elections, freedom of political parties); rights (civil rights, freedom of expression and press, political equality); rule of law (impartiality of the judiciary, non-corruption); and participation (civil society, voter turnout, local democracy)<sup>24</sup>. On the other hand, the V-Dem Institute defines electoral democracy, the liberal dimension, the equality dimension, the participation dimension and the weighting dimension as components of democracy. These categories or dimensions are given a numerical value, allowing countries to be classified according to their democratic status.

Freedom House classifies states into established and unestablished democracies and autocracies, and hybrid states with features of both<sup>25</sup>. In the classification previously used by International IDEA, states can be democratic, authoritarian or hybrids of these<sup>26</sup>. The picture of the global state and development of democracy is shaped by the number of countries where democracy is strengthening and the number where it is weakening.

The figures produced by these organisations are mainly based on the assessments of experts concerning changes in the state of democracy<sup>27</sup>. There have also been criticisms of the expert-driven indicators<sup>28</sup>. The definition of indicators always involves choices that could legitimately be made differently. For example, we could question whether the position of vulnerable groups has been sufficiently taken into account in the design of indicators. On the other hand, expert assessments have been judged to give a more negative picture of democratic developments than election research, often based on a very narrow conception of democracy that ignores the value of civic participation<sup>29</sup>. Some studies have also expressed scepticism about the typification of governments<sup>30</sup>.

The main limitation of those following the global state of democracy is

24 International IDEA (2023) The global state of democracy. The new checks and balances. <https://www.idea.int/sites/default/files/2023-11/the-global-state-of-democracy-2023-the-new-checks-and-balances.pdf>, p.6. Previously, a separate category was constraints on power; see International IDEA 2022, p.4.

25 <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/nations-transit/scores>

26 International IDEA 2022, s.3

27 V-Dem Methodology. <https://v-dem.net/about/v-dem-project/methodology/>

28 Bhuta, N., Malito, D.V. & Umbach, G. (2018). Introduction: Of Numbers and Narratives—Indicators in Global Governance and the Rise of a Reflexive Indicator Culture, in Malito, D., Umbach, G., Bhuta, N. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of Indicators in Global Governance*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62707-6\\_1](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-62707-6_1)

29 Little, A. & Meng, A. (2023). *Measuring Democratic Backsliding*. Tulossa: "PS: Political Science & Politics", Saatavilla: SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=4327307>, <http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.4327307>

30 Niño-Zarazúa et al.2020

state-centricity: it is difficult to say much about the development of global or transnational forms of democracy from these analyses. The question of the possibility of global democracy and the democratisation of supranational institutions<sup>31</sup> is central to the future of democracy. The transnational networking and influence of civil society should also be taken into account when analysing the state of democracy. Global democracy is a distinct level of democracy, not just an aggregation of situations within states<sup>32</sup>.

## Analysing the state of democracy

Many bodies have independently developed influential and widely used methodologies for studying the state of democracy within states. They include in particular:

- The V-Dem institute<sup>33</sup>
- International IDEA<sup>34</sup>
- The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) .<sup>35</sup>

Many international organisations and research institutes also monitor developments that are important for democracy, focusing on more specific phenomena. They include in particular:

- CIVICUS (freedom and space for civil society)<sup>36</sup>
- OECD Civic Space Scan (civic space within OECD countries)<sup>37</sup>
- Reporters Without Borders (press freedom)<sup>38</sup>
- Centre for media pluralism and media freedom)<sup>39</sup>
- World justice project (rule of law)<sup>40</sup>.

31 See e.g. Teivainen, T., & Patomäki, H. (2003). *Globaali demokratia: Global Democracy*. (1 ed.) Gaudeamus.

32 E.g. Held, David (1995). *Democracy and the Global Order: From the Modern State to Cosmopolitan Governance*. Lontoo: Polity Press.

33 V-dem institute. (2023b). *Democracy report 2023. Defiance in the face of autocratization*. [https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem\\_democracyreport2023\\_lowres.pdf](https://www.v-dem.net/documents/29/V-dem_democracyreport2023_lowres.pdf)

34 International IDEA 2022

35 Economist Intelligence Unit. (2022) *Democracy Index 2022*. <https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2022/>

36 CIVICUS (2023) *State of civil society report*. [https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2023/state-of-civil-society-report-2023\\_en.pdf](https://www.civicus.org/documents/reports-and-publications/SOCS/2023/state-of-civil-society-report-2023_en.pdf)

37 OECD (2023). *The Protection and promotion of civic space. Strengthening alignment with international standards and guidance*. <https://web.archive.oecd.org/2023-03-14/648655-protecting-and-promoting-civic-space-highlights.pdf>

38 <https://rsf.org/en/our-reports>

39 <https://cmpf.eui.eu/media-pluralism-monitor-2023/>

40 <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global>

## Global change

Practically all assessments of the global state of democracy are pessimistic in nature. According to the V-Dem Institute, 72% of the world's population (5.7 billion people) live under varying degrees of autocracy. In addition, 42 countries are becoming more autocratic in nature. These 42 states are home to 43% of the world's population. However, the global percentages are heavily influenced by the definitions given to individual countries. For example, the collapse in the number of people living in democracies is significantly explained by the moves to classify India as an "electoral autocracy" rather than a democracy.

The number of people living in countries classified as "closed autocracies" has remained fairly stable over the past decade. A significant increase has occurred in states classified as "electoral autocracies". So the global deterioration in democracy is not so much explained by a weakening of the formal institutions of democratic decision-making as by changes in more subtle elements of democracy, such as the state of civil society, press freedom, opposition, and civil liberties.

The Economist Intelligence Unit's Democracy Index 2022 estimates that the state of democracy will remain unchanged in 2022, despite the lifting of pandemic restrictions - a way of saying that the state has deteriorated. The EIU has in previous years rated the situation as more serious than other democracy indices, probably because it places more emphasis on individual freedoms. There were few changes in the classification of states.

Looking at longer-term developments, democracy progressed strongly from the 1970s until the early 2000s, when it came to a halt. In the early 2010s, democracy began to deteriorate. The number of liberal democracies peaked (44) in 2009 and now stands at 32.<sup>41</sup> In 2022, the proportion of the world's population living in non-democratic states had returned to 1986 levels.<sup>42</sup>

According to International IDEA, more than twice as many countries have become more authoritarian since 2016 than democratising countries. Moreover, authoritarianism is deepening in many cases. In almost half of the authoritarian countries, the situation is deteriorating in at least one aspect of democracy.<sup>43</sup>

According to Reporters Without Borders' latest analysis, the situation of freedom of expression is "very serious" in 31 countries and "difficult" in 42. In total, seven out of ten countries have a poor situation. Reporters Without Borders also warns that fake news poses a new threat to press freedom<sup>44</sup>. There is also a long way to go to achieve political equality: around the world, women are still underrepresented at all levels of government<sup>45</sup>, and most countries in the world have never had a female leader<sup>46</sup>.

41 V-Dem institute 2023b, p.11

42 V-Dem institute 2023b

43 International IDEA 2022

44 <https://rsf.org/en/2023-world-press-freedom-index-journalism-threatened-fake-content-industry>

45 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/28/women-leaders-around-the-world/>

46 <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/03/28/women-leaders-around-the-world/>

Although as a major global trend democracy is deteriorating, the picture is not without contradictions. It is sometimes pointed out that the deterioration of democracy has been warned about since the 1990s<sup>47</sup>, and the phenomenon is not altogether new. In some countries, democracy is becoming stronger. International IDEA's Global state of democracy report cites the Gambia, Niger<sup>48</sup> and Zambia as positive examples and points out that the African continent has remained fairly resilient despite enormous challenges<sup>49</sup>. The V-Dem Institute also identifies countries that are returning to democracy, referring to countries where, after a short-lived slide to authoritarianism, democratic institutions are again being strengthened<sup>50</sup>. Such countries (e.g. Ecuador, Maldives, Zambia) have seen large-scale mobilisation against those in power, a change of power through elections, or the ability of institutions such as the judiciary or political opposition to sustain democracy. International support has also played a role.

## Reasons for the deterioration of democracy

The erosion of democracy (as well as its consolidation) is a complex process, often creating a self-feeding cycle. In this cycle, it is difficult to distinguish between cause and effect. For example, political authoritarianism leads to a deterioration of civil society, but equally a deterioration of civil society feeds political authoritarianism<sup>51</sup>. Since the institutions that sustain democracy exist wherever people form and articulate social opinions, the range of processes and actors that undermine democracy is also

*The erosion of democracy (as well as its consolidation) is a complex process, often creating a self-feeding cycle.*

47 Carothers, Thomas & Youngs, Richard (2017). Democracy Is Not Dying. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2017/04/11/democracy-is-not-dying-pub-68651>

48 Since the publication of the report, however, the situation in Niger has deteriorated sharply due to the military coup.

49 International IDEA 2022

50 V-Dem institute 2023b, s. 28-29

51 Kontinen, T., Palmusaari, M., Pernthaler, M., Ranta, E. & Salmivaara, A. (2022). Finland's action to strengthen civil societies and advance their enabling environment. Helsinki: MFA.

enormous.<sup>52</sup> Even democratically elected leaders can introduce authoritarian reforms that undermine democracy: recent developments in Tunisia, Hungary and Poland are often used as examples. Elections can also be above board in themselves while being overshadowed by fear of violence<sup>53</sup>.

Often, democratic practices deteriorate incrementally rather than being suddenly overturned, though this point is sometimes obscured by the rise of high-profile military coups<sup>54</sup>. In reality, more common are the creeping restrictions on information, political opposition and civil society. Restrictions introduced during the coronavirus pandemic were also used around the world as a pretext for curtailing political opposition and civil society activity. Often, corruption bolsters these tendencies by eroding trust in government and warping politics in favour of private interests<sup>55</sup>.

A slow slide towards authoritarianism is not possible without sufficient support for a more authoritarian system from the state administration and, to some extent, from the public. A particular concern for democracy is the erosion of perceived trust in democratic institutions. The Global State of Democracy report judges that democratic regimes have not been able to demonstrate with sufficient conviction that they are able to meet people's needs. Democracy has only been able to recover and perhaps find its bearings after the lifting of the restrictions of the coronavirus pandemic, with the global cost of living crisis affecting people's living conditions, particularly for the poorest<sup>56</sup>. Democracies falter if their ability to provide essential services and basic sustenance to the people is undermined. The gap between institutional performance and societal expectations widens.

According to Afrobarometer's publications, Africans support democracy and democratic institutions in principle, but recently their faith in elections has abated<sup>57</sup>. Only less than half of Africans believe that elections work to oust unwanted leaders<sup>58</sup>, though the same survey shows that support for the rule of law remains strong and has even increased, meaning that people still believe in some of the foundations of democracy.

More generally, the functioning of democracies is affected by megatrends

52 Bermeo, N. (2016). On democratic backsliding. *Journal of Democracy* 27 (1): 5–19.

53 Jenkins, S. (2020). The politics of fear and the securitization of African elections. *Democratization*, 27(5), 836-853.

54 Cheeseman, N. & Desrosiers, M. (2023). How (not) to engage with authoritarian states. Westminster Foundation for democracy, s. 32

55 Jorum Duri and Mathias Bak (2022) Contribution of anti-corruption measures to democracy promotion. U4 Anti-Corruption Helpdesk. <https://www.u4.no/publications/contribution-of-anti-corruption-measures-to-democracy-promotion.pdf>

56 Dorling, D. (2023) From the pandemic to the cost-of-living crisis – what are we learning? In Arabadjieva, K., N. Countouris, B. L. Fabris and W. Zwysen (eds.), *Transformative ideas – ensuring a just share of progress for all*, Bryssel: ETUI, s.21-38; Lokshin, Michael, Zurab Sajaia & Iván Torre. "Who Suffers the Most from the Cost-of-Living Crisis?" (2023). World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 10377. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099330104062314532/pdf/IDU030c0d9e0028c7043ae0a6ed02db23bde7115.pdf>

57 Afrobarometer Network (2023). Africans want more democracy, but their leaders still aren't listening. <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/PP85-PAP20-Africans-want-more-democracy-but-leaders-arent-listening-Afrobarometer-Pan-Africa-Profile-18jan23.pdf>

58 Cormack-Hale, F.M. & Dome, M.Z. (2022). Support for elections weakens among Africans; many see them as ineffective in holding leaders accountable. Afrobarometer Dispatch No. 5511 <https://www.afrobarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/AD551-PAP15-Support-for-elections-weakens-in-Africa-Afrobarometer-Pan-Africa-Profile-7sept22.pdf>, s.2

(globalisation, climate change, economic and business restructuring, urbanisation, changing media environments)<sup>59</sup>. A wide range of social and economic shocks can rapidly alter the status quo<sup>60</sup>. Sometimes the starting point of the current deterioration of democracy is dated back to the financial crisis of 2008 and the economic hardship it triggered<sup>61</sup>.

Some megatrends present both opportunities and threats. For example, digitalisation enables communication, networking and access to information even in closed autocracies. On the other hand, it has created activist surveillance, cyberbullying and new inequalities. Harassment and inequalities are often gendered<sup>62</sup>. Disinformation is also growing in volume and propagation.

The deterioration of democracy can also be the result of conscious and organised action. This can be seen, for example, in the activities of the so-called antigender movement, which attacks equal participation and the scope for action<sup>63</sup>. In the case of authoritarian states, there is networking and learning, just as in the case of democratic actors. For example, following the 2012 NGO law (or “foreign agent law”) in Russia, 50 other states have passed similar laws<sup>64</sup>. China, Russia and a number of other countries that question the universality of human rights have increased their cooperation with each other, including within UN human rights bodies.

And yet, in democratic countries, democracy has not been seen to have become more inclusive, more

59 Finnish Government 2022

60 International IDEA 2022

61 Finnish Government 2022

62 Nikulainen 2023

63 Denkovski, Damjan, Bernarding, Nina & Lunz, Kristina (2021) Understanding and countering the transnational anti-gender movement. Volume 1. Berliini: Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy. [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57cd7cd9d482e9784e4ccc34/t/60c865e5f8c3ce53222039e3/1623746023308/PowerOverRights\\_Volume1\\_web.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/57cd7cd9d482e9784e4ccc34/t/60c865e5f8c3ce53222039e3/1623746023308/PowerOverRights_Volume1_web.pdf)

64 Nichols Haddad, H. & McIntosh Sundstrom, L. (2023). Foreign agents or agents of justice? Private foundations, backlash against non-governmental organizations, and international human rights litigation. *Law & Society Review*. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/lasr.12642>.

equal and more responsive to people's concerns<sup>65</sup>. Even democracies that function well in principle may suffer from pseudo-socialisation and a lack of faith in real empowerment. At the global level, there has been a lack of models of better-functioning democracies that offer inspiring perspectives on the potential of democracy. It is important for democracy to show that it is evolving rather than appearing to be a static model whose promise has already been realised.

## Democratic countries take action: democracy support

Democratic countries seek to support democratisation at the global level. There is no consensus on the definition of democracy support, but the European Democracy Hub includes activities that promote civil and political rights, support civil society, civic and political education, election support, election observation, rule of law, media support, strengthening parliaments, support for political participation, support for political parties, support for political inclusiveness and anti-corruption work<sup>66</sup>.

Different countries have organised their support in different ways. Some countries have separate democracy support programmes, such as France's €50 million programme to support democracy among youth and in Africa<sup>67</sup>. Others, such as Germany, only compile statistics on their democracy support retrospectively. The emphasis on democracy work also varies from country to country. About one-third of Sweden's development funding goes to democracy support in the broad sense and about one-tenth in the narrow sense<sup>68</sup>. Denmark spent €266 million on programmes in 2022, which are recorded under the category "governance and civil society".<sup>69</sup> The largest single donors according to the DAC classification in 2021 were Germany, the US and the EU<sup>70</sup>.

In EU democracy support, the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)<sup>71</sup> has a budget of €79.9 billion for the period 2021-2027, of which 15% is earmarked for the promotion of human rights, democracy and good governance. The Global Europe Human Rights and Democracy programme was launched in December 2021 with €1.5 billion in funding by 2027<sup>72</sup>.

Globally, funding within the DAC category of "governance and civil society" was

65 International IDEA 2022

66 [democracy-aid.europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu](https://democracy-aid.europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu)

67 Youngs, Richard, Ventura, Elena et al. (2023). European democracy support annual review. Brussels: Carnegie endowment for international peace, s. 22

68 Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2020

69 Youngs et al. 2023, s. 22

70 Haettu OECD:n tilastoista. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/> <https://stats.oecd.org/qwids/#?x=1&y=6&f=3:49,4:1,5:4,2:1,7:1&q=3:51,48,49+4:1+5:4+2:1+7:1+1:2,3,4,5,6,58,7,8,9,10,11,59,60,12,13,14,61,172,15,16,17,18,62,19,63,75,20,21,22,23,24,36+6:2017,2018,2019,2020,2021,2022>

71 The Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation instrument

72 Youngs et al. 2023, s. 22

\$11.4 billion in 2021, a slight decrease from 2018-2020 levels<sup>73</sup>. Of the total global support for governance, around three-quarters goes to support for basic institutions (“state building”) and one-quarter to democracy support. The ratio has remained stable.

The new DAC countries of the former Eastern Bloc have long tended to specialise in democracy support, seeing this as representing the expertise and added value of the newly democratised countries.<sup>74</sup> They have also steadily increased their democracy support, although the amounts are still very small. In recent years, Poland has continued to increase its support to the national democracy support instrument Solidarity Fund PL<sup>75</sup>, even though the country itself is taking a significant step backwards in democratisation.

Many donors have stressed the importance of civil society in their activities. The EU's 2017 declaration *The European Consensus on Development calls for mainstreaming civil society in all EU development instruments, programmes and areas of cooperation*<sup>76</sup>. In 2021, the OECD established a Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development and Humanitarian Aid. This focuses on respecting, protecting and promoting civic space, supporting and engaging with civil society, and encouraging NGOs to be effective, transparent and accountable<sup>77</sup>.

## Other activities and coherence by democratic countries

In the world of diplomacy and international politics, democracy is, above all, polarised: in the “war of narratives”, pro-human rights/democracy states and authoritarian states form increasingly distinct blocs. The strengthening of authoritarianism has also intensified cooperation between democratic countries and increased the motivation to promote democracy. The global deterioration of democracy has led to a more determined approach to democracy promotion. In the field of development cooperation, too, the democracy theme has been strengthened, and efforts have been made to integrate it in a cross-cutting way.

But democracy is not a matter of declarations; it requires coherence. Democratic countries do not always live up to their ideals, which undermines their credibility as champions of democracy. In their foreign policy, democracy as a guiding principle may lose precedence to other considerations, especially in the areas of security, trade

73 Retrieved from OECD statistics. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/>

74 Drązkiewicz, E. (2013). From recipient to donor: The case of Polish development co-operation. *Human Organization* 72 (1), 65-75. Horký, O. (2012) The Transfer of the Central and Eastern European ‘Transition Experience’ to the South: Myth or Reality? *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* 13 (1), 17-32.

75 Youngs et al. 2023, s.23

76 The new European consensus on development. Our world, our dignity, our future. [https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-09/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626\\_en.pdf](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2019-09/european-consensus-on-development-final-20170626_en.pdf)

77 OECD. (2021). Recommendation on Enabling Civil Society in Development Co-operation and Humanitarian Assistance. <https://legalinstruments.oecd.org/en/instruments/OECD-LEGAL-5021>

and resources. Perceptions of geopolitical expediency and the emphasis on “stability” can thus end up producing incongruous messages.

The fight against terrorism and defence cooperation have also been opportunities for authoritarian regimes to undermine democracy, when democratic states have effectively stated that democracy is not their top priority. The war in Ukraine has shifted the focus of foreign policy from democracy to security, although the rhetoric triggered by the conflict has focused on democracy.<sup>78</sup> The recent distribution of coronavirus vaccines, for example, in which the global North ensured that it obtained the vaccines first, human rights abuses in the “war on terror” and EU agreements with Turkey and Tunisia to combat migration from the global South may also have raised suspicions about the motives of donor countries.

Acting on vacillating principles creates problems for promoting democracy<sup>79</sup>. This challenge is underlined by the fact that development cooperation may be seen as part of a continuum of colonial relations and, thus, as an attempt to challenge the sovereignty of the recipient country. By equating self-determination with authoritarianism, undemocratic leaders have been able to exploit mindsets derived from memories of colonialist continuums.

On the other hand, cooperation with authoritarian regimes is difficult to avoid: for example, the share of world trade between democratic states has fallen from 74% in the late 1990s to 47% today<sup>80</sup>. This means not only that the economic power of authoritarian states is growing but also that democracies increasingly have to consider how to deal with cooperation with authoritarian states in trade relations. Moreover, global problems such as climate change will, in any case, require some level of cooperation.

Sometimes, the ideas that bypass democracy may come from the development policy emphasis.

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*But democracy  
is not a matter  
of declarations;  
it requires  
coherence.*

78 Youngs et al. 2023, p. 40

79 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, pp. 50-52

80 V-Dem institute 2023, p. 33

The message about the importance of democracy may have been drowned out, above all, by quantifiable results. Monitoring results rather than processes has led to implicit support for authoritarian “success stories”. Rwanda, for example, can be seen as a case where success in poverty reduction has served as a tacit justification for authoritarianism<sup>81</sup>. Quantitative economic results are prioritised results, and they have been achieved.

Development policy also runs the risk of thinking of action as a one-way export of knowledge. Democratic actors in donor countries may have been reluctant to identify and learn from democratic innovations in the Global South. However, Latin America has been seen as a “test laboratory for civic participation and democratic innovations”<sup>82</sup>, from which, for example, participatory budgeting has been adopted for limited use also in Finland. Also in Africa, “imperfect” or “hybrid” participatory processes have been identified<sup>83</sup>, and in Asia, democratic innovation has been made, especially in digitalisation and inclusion<sup>84</sup>.

81 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, p. 30-31

82 Pogrebinski, Thamy & Ross, Melisa (2019). Democratic innovations in Latin America. Teoksessa Elstub, Stephen & Escobar, Oliver Handbook of democratic innovation and governance. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, pp.389-403

83 Ferreira, Isabel & Allegretti, Giovanni (2019). Local democratic innovations in Africa. Teoksessa Elstub, Stephen & Escobar, Oliver Handbook of democratic innovation and governance. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, s. 449-470

84 Baek, Jinkyung (2023) Lessons from Asia – Exploring Worldwide Democratic Innovations. European democracy hub. <https://europeandemocracyhub.epd.eu/lessons-from-asia/>



2.

## The state of civil society

### Definitions of civil society

Civil society typically refers to a non-state space for social action and participation, including NGOs and various free associations, networks and groups of citizens. Civil society can be understood as a local, national or transnational “space” of participation. According to the concise definition of the Finnish Citizens Forum, “civil society consists of citizens' voluntary action to build the common good”<sup>85</sup>.

The definition is not unambiguous, though. Even in many countries with a relatively free civil society, civil society is attached to the state in many ways - Finland is a case in point. The definition of civil society actors also varies. In the case of religious communities, for example, there has sometimes been a debate about whether they should be included in civil society.

The concept of civil society has also not worked in the same way in the global North and South. In the North, the development of ideas of citizenship has a long history, shaped by modernisation, urbanisation and individualisation. Civil society as a socially identified space separate from the state and the market is thus the result of a long process. The idea of civil society has also become part of the legitimacy of the state.

Developing countries typically have different birth histories, and most of them are still marked by the legacy of colonialism. In the context of the Global South, the boundaries between state and civil society, on the one hand, and business and civil society,

85 <https://kansalaisyhteiskunta.fi/tietopankki/kategoria/civil-society/>

on the other, may not always be so clear<sup>86</sup>. Citizenship as a relationship between individuals and the state, on the one hand, and local communities, on the other, can also be structured in different ways. Many scholars have therefore criticised the projection of the concept of an “ideal” civil society onto Southern countries and stressed that civil society should always be seen through the lens of local conditions<sup>87</sup>.

On the other hand, the separation of state and civil society is urgently needed, as authoritarian regimes often seek to create controlled NGOs as an extension of their power. Moreover, many civil society actors, including church denominations and trade unions, are forced to compromise under authoritarian conditions and can be outright hijacked.<sup>88</sup> The specificities of the Global South can easily become an excuse for centralising power. Even if citizenship is understood differently from the Global North, the free civic space is of great importance.

## The importance of civil society

Civil society has recently come to be seen more and more as a necessary component of democracy. Civil society supports and strengthens democracy, educates for social influence and acts as a counterforce when necessary. The involvement of civil society is essential to ensure free and fair elections.<sup>89</sup> A functional democracy, in turn, supports civil society. Civil society has also become increasingly important in monitoring and promoting the implementation of fundamental and human rights. The activities of human rights defenders have a positive impact on the development of fundamental human rights at local, national, regional and global levels.

Strengthening civil society is both an important objective in itself and a means of reinforcing other objectives in development policy worldwide. There are several interpretations of democratisation, some of which emphasise structures and institutions. Recently, however, a protagonist-driven approach has emerged, in which individual actors, such as NGOs, are seen as playing an important role in democratisation processes and in sustaining democracy<sup>90</sup>.

The importance of civil society as a producer of inclusion has also been highlighted. Participation binds people to society and gives meaning to citizenship. It should also be understood as a learning process and, thus, as a state of growing civic competence. The Global State of Democracy Report suggests that young people, in particular, should be provided with specific spaces and established forums to participate meaningfully in politics and especially in shaping decisions that affect them<sup>91</sup>. Civic engagement is also a way of learning citizenship skills. In addition, civil society creates

86 Kontinen et al. 2022, s. 18

87 Kamruzzaman, Palash (toim.) (2019). *Civil Society in the Global South*. Oxon: Routledge.

88 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, s. 34-35.

89 CIVICUS 2023

90 Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2020

91 International IDEA 2022

opportunities for vulnerable groups to claim their right to political participation. An example of this is the work of disability organisations to develop the political participation of people with disabilities.

Nevertheless, the institutions of global governance will not reach their full potential without the participation of civil society. Civil society can be seen to play a role in the development of intergovernmental organisations. Indeed, civil society is not only a national or local space but also forms transnational spaces and operates beyond national borders. Civil society also has a particular voice in the demands to stop climate change, pollution and the loss of biodiversity.

State of civil society Civil society's importance is emphasised in difficult situations. In its 2023 State of Civil Society Report, CIVICUS highlights its particular importance in times of conflict. In such exceptional circumstances, states' capacity to deliver services and uphold the rights of victims may be lacking. In addition to providing services and political and legal support, civil society actors often monitor and collect information on human rights violations.<sup>92</sup>

But it is worth remembering that undemocratic activities also take place within civil society. Civil society also includes populist, sexist and racist actors<sup>93</sup>, some of whom are conspicuously opposed to women's rights, especially sexual and reproductive rights. It is also common for systematic anti-equality activities to form neutral-sounding NGOs to support their efforts<sup>94</sup>.

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*Civil society is not only a national or local space but also forms transnational spaces and operates beyond national borders.*

92 CIVICUS 2023

93 Kontinen et al. 2022, p. 28

94 Denkovski, Damjan (2022) *Disrupting the multilateral order? The impact of anti-gender actors on multilateral structures in Europe?* Berlin: Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy.

## Changes: civic space

Civil society does not exist in a vacuum but is heavily influenced by the surrounding state and cultural structures. The enabling environment for civil society can be defined, for example, along the lines of the Swedish principles of support for organisations<sup>95</sup>. According to this definition, the enabling environment consists of a legislative and regulatory framework conducive to civil society activity, opportunities for civil society to participate in policy processes, donor support for civil society and the effectiveness of organisational development.

In its 2021 report, CIVICUS, which monitors global developments in the state of civil society, estimated that 117 of the world's 197 countries had imposed severe restrictions on civic space, which had deteriorated in 13 countries and strengthened in only one since the previous report. Globally, new laws are constantly being introduced to suppress civic space: at least 50 countries have created such new legislation in recent years<sup>96</sup>. The experience of and confidence in participation is diminishing even in well-established democracies<sup>97</sup>.

Civic space can be undermined not only by state actors but also by those in the business sector, either directly or indirectly<sup>98</sup>. State and business interests may also be intertwined. This has been seen in particular in situations where economic interests have come into conflict with the demands of trade unions and environmental or human rights actors. In particular, in land use and natural resource issues, companies may have a direct interest in preventing civil society from taking action. When there are high financial stakes, deep inequalities and usually also corruption, the result can be perilous for civil society actors.

Civil society does not deteriorate uniformly, but the constraints typically hit already vulnerable groups hardest. These especially include groups and organisations working on women's issues, the environment, labour rights, sexual minorities and youth issues. Women and minorities are subject to harassment around the world that impedes their political and social agency. Women politicians, journalists, activists and human rights defenders are blocked from participating in politics and social debate through gender-based violence and harassment. This is often backed up by organised anti-gender movements as part of an organised attack on democracy. Gender-based violence and harassment have been identified as one of the main barriers to women's political

95 Kontinen et al. 2022, 22-23

96 Amnesty International (2019). Laws designed to silence: The global crackdown on civil society organizations. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/act30/9647/2019/en/>

97 OECD 2023.

98 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2017) Guidelines for Civil Society in Development Policy. <https://um.fi/documents/35732/0/Guidelines+for+civil+society+in+development+policy.pdf/4a19a2aa-76fd-020e-224d-ecd-98045206f?i=1534925676147>, p. 7

participation<sup>99</sup>, although there is no comparable global data on this.

Indeed, the most acute issues relating to the state of civil society often concern the immediate security of those involved. The situation of environmental and human rights defenders is dangerous in many countries. The situation is particularly difficult in zones of conflict and in countries where the legal basis for human rights is not in place. Human rights defenders are at risk of execution, torture, ill-treatment, arbitrary arrest, death threats and harassment, and false accusations and convictions<sup>100</sup>. Anti-corruption activists and representatives of various minority organisations may also face such dangers.

The deteriorating state of the civic space is also reflected in a further worsening of the situation of groups in a weaker position of power.<sup>101</sup> For example, gender equality improves as women's groups and organisations have more opportunities and space to assert their rights, and deteriorates as this space is reduced.

## Changes: the form of civil society

While the state of civil society around the world has become more difficult, recent years have also seen the emergence of a new form of activism. Citizen activism has been seen as a 'mega-trend'. When Russia's invasion of Ukraine significantly raised the cost of living around the world, a huge wave of protests ensued. CIVICUS reports that by 2022 there will have been more than 12,500 protests around the world in 133 countries<sup>102</sup>. Major new protest movements have also emerged around anti-racism and environmental justice. According to Tiina Kontinen et al, the main changing trends in civil society include new forms of activism and the rise of anti-racism and anti-sexism in new movements<sup>103</sup>.

In recent years, activism against authoritarian regimes has increased. Examples include Libya, Sudan, Belarus and Myanmar. Civic action on fundamental and human rights has also diversified. Protests against the corruption of regimes have increased, global environmental and climate movements are also raising human rights issues, there is greater visibility of opposition to racist and sexist cultures, and top athletes and

99 UN Women (2021) Preventing violence against women in politics. Guidance note. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2021/Guidance-note-Preventing-violence-against-women-in-politics-en.pdf>; UN Women (2020) Data and violence against women in politics: Expert group meeting report and recommendations. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/08/egm-report-data-and-violence-against-women-in-politics>; Un Women & UNDP (2017) Preventing violence against women in elections. A programming guide. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2017/Preventing-VAW-in-elections-Summary-en.pdf>

100 United Nations office of the high commissioner (2023). Challenges faced by human rights defenders. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/sr-human-rights-defenders/challenges-faced-human-rights-defenders>

101 EEAS (2020) EU action plan on human rights and democracy 2020-2024. [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu\\_action\\_plan\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_democracy\\_2020-2024.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf)

102 CIVICUS 2023

103 Kontinen et al. 2022, pp. 35-36

prominent artists are taking a stand against human rights violations<sup>104</sup>.

A significant part of civil society is not formally organised. Recently, there has been increasing discussion about the rise of the so-called fourth sector<sup>105</sup>. The term refers to loosely and freely organised networks. Such groups have, of course, traditionally been abundant in developing countries. Today, a significant part of the mobilising power of civil society comes from outside the traditional NGO field: small, informal groups, often with women, young people and indigenous people as key organisers<sup>106</sup>. However, the voice of civil society is typically used by registered and professional NGOs. From the perspective of civil society support, the situation is difficult because many donors may be willing to support loosely organised groups, but it is administratively difficult to provide such support. On the other hand, funding for organisations in general can be limited: for example, only one per cent of the money allocated to gender equality reaches women's rights organisations (in the Global South)<sup>107</sup>.

In terms of support for civil society, a global trend is highlighted by the debate on the development of flexible governance models to reduce administrative pressure. Often, especially for smaller actors, the administrative requirements have proved burdensome. Another important new development in civil society support is the increasing emphasis on localism. The involvement of local civil society actors has not always been self-evident and the demand for their participation has increased.<sup>108</sup>

104 Finnish Government (2021). Valtioneuvoston ihmisoikeuspoliittinen selonteko. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163674/VN\\_2021\\_92.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163674/VN_2021_92.pdf?sequence=7&isAllowed=y), s.17

105 E.g. in Finland: Mäenpää, P. & Faehnle, M. (2021). Neljäs sektori: Kuinka kaupunkiaktivismi haastaa hallinnon, muuttaa markkinat ja laajentaa demokratiaa. (The Fourth Sector: How urban activism challenges governance, transforms markets and expands democracy). Tampere: Vastapaino.

106 CIVICUS 2023

107 Staszewska, Kasia, Dolker, Tenzin & Miller, Kellea (2019) Only 1% of gender equality funding is going to women's organisations – why? AWID analysis. <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/only-1-gender-equality-funding-going-womens-organisations-why>

108 Kontinen et al. 2022, pp.36-37



### 3. Finland and democracy support

#### Finland as an actor

Finland started funding democracy work in the 1990s, as the issue gained more international attention following the end of the Cold War. In 2001, the MFA published the handbook *Thinking strategically about democracy assistance*<sup>109</sup>. The underlying assumption in it is that democracy will inevitably be boosted. It argues that "the world has witnessed the triumph of democracy as the only form of truly legitimate and rational government"<sup>110</sup>, although it takes time to *consolidate* democracies<sup>111</sup>.

Whereas in the early 2000s the need for new approaches was seen as a challenge for democracy support<sup>112</sup>, two decades later the challenge is a radical change in background assumptions and context. From consolidating democracy to defending democracy. This is also reflected in several recent Finnish policy briefs and

109 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2001) *Thinking strategically about democracy assistance*. [https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/thinking\\_strategically\\_about\\_democracy\\_assistance.pdf/b01de4a1-8f5a-ba23-d442-b7716bb3df36?t=1560452033130](https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/thinking_strategically_about_democracy_assistance.pdf/b01de4a1-8f5a-ba23-d442-b7716bb3df36?t=1560452033130)

110 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2001, p. 7

111 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2001, p.13

112 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2001, p.7

reports<sup>113</sup>. Although democracy has not been a particularly high priority in Finland's development policy, the recent rapid deterioration of democracy has nevertheless prompted reflection on how to strengthen democracy work and respond to the state of democracy. Finland emphasises a broad concept of democracy, including, above all, the participation of different vulnerable groups, equality and, in particular, human rights.

For democracy support to work, it is essential to analyse its own reference group and its associations: development policy does not take place in a foreign policy vacuum. Other donor countries' activities and historical reputations have an impact on the implementation of development policy.

In practice, Finland is most often positioned first and foremost as part of the EU bloc and the wider West. The impact of external relations may also change: for Finland in particular, the impact of NATO membership has yet to be seen.

Finland as an actor is, of course, also multilayered. NGOs identify with Finland, but they have their own identities, ways of working and international networks. In practice, it is often the embassies that implement development policy and present Finland's views<sup>114</sup>. Their activities can vary from country to country. For example, in some countries, embassies have sought to protect activists in danger, but this is neither a widespread nor systematic practice<sup>115</sup>.

## Policy guidelines

At the policy guideline and declaratory level,, Finland is firmly committed to promoting democracy. Most of these declarations focus on human rights, and democracy is discussed in the context of human rights and as a related issue. The Government Resolution on Finnish Democracy Policy in the 2020s states that democracy is a "triad" together with the rule of law and human rights<sup>116</sup>. This is in line, for example, with the EU's approach, which also clearly links human rights and democracy, emphasising economic, social, cultural and labour rights<sup>117</sup>, as well as the protection of minorities and human rights defenders<sup>118</sup>.

The government programme is the most important policy document, including for development policy. In the current Finnish government programme, democracy is mentioned quite often, but the measures are related to national policy, and even in the external relations section, references to democracy are mostly focused on foreign

113 E.g. Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2021b). Development Policy Review 2021. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163171/VN\\_2021\\_23.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163171/VN_2021_23.pdf?sequence=2&isAllowed=y), p. 7; Department of Foreign Affairs (2023) Women, Peace and Security. Finland's National Action Programme. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164697/UM\\_2023\\_3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164697/UM_2023_3.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), p.11.

114 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017, p. 9

115 Kontinen et al. 2022, p.67

116 Finnish Government 2022, p. 12

117 EEAS 2020, p. 15

118 EEAS 2020, p., 12

policy rather than development policy. The development policy priorities for this government term are women, education, digitalisation and Ukraine: democracy is therefore not one of them. However, in the section on development policy, the government programme states, “A well-functioning democracy, the rule of law, human rights and a vibrant civil society are prerequisites for sustainable social development, which the Government will support.” This is assumed to mean that the promotion of democracy and the rule of law will continue to be the goals of Finland’s development policy.

There are additionally many different policy guidelines in the field of development policy, which guide action with varying degrees of emphasis. The MFA’s Democracy Support Policy is from 2014<sup>119</sup>. Although the policy is not often referred to in practice anymore, it defines Finland’s broad concept of democracy, which “includes the promotion of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, good governance and the eradication of corruption”<sup>120</sup>. According to the policy, Finland promotes its objectives by supporting human rights actors, good governance and the development of the rule of law, and by strengthening security-producing social institutions<sup>121</sup>.

Promoting the political and economic participation of women and vulnerable, marginalised and discriminated groups is identified as one of the main themes of democracy support policy. Supporting and strengthening the capacities of civil society, in particular human rights defenders, the development of the rule of law, good governance and anti-corruption of public institutions and mechanisms, free and fair elections, parliamentary capacity and multiparty systems are also highlighted<sup>122</sup>.

Similar formulations are used in most of the relevant reports and policies. For example, the 2020 Government Report on Foreign and Security Policy states that the value-based foundation of Finland’s foreign and security policy is respect for and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law<sup>123</sup>. The 2021 Report on Development Policy across Parliamentary Terms states that Finland promotes democratic development and the rule of law in societies as part of its development policy and development cooperation.

According to the government’s democracy support policy, Finland actively participates in the EU’s democracy work and supports international democratisation<sup>124</sup>. Finland is aligned to promote effective democracy in UN institutions and country groups such as the Community of Democracies, IDEA and the Council of Europe. Finland is also aligned to promote the human rights treaty monitoring system<sup>125</sup> and the role of the Council of Europe as an actor for human rights, democracy and the rule of law.

119 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2014) The Ministry for Foreign Affairs’ Democracy Support Policy. [https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/ministry\\_for\\_foreign\\_affairs\\_democracy\\_support\\_policy.pdf/34199cf4-2233-91d0-9a0d-4c25b56b1755?i=1560450149244](https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/ministry_for_foreign_affairs_democracy_support_policy.pdf/34199cf4-2233-91d0-9a0d-4c25b56b1755?i=1560450149244)

120 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2014 p.2

121 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2014, p.3

122 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2014, p.4

123 Government (2020) Report on the Government’s foreign and security policy. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162513/VN\\_2020\\_30.pdf?sequence=1](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162513/VN_2020_30.pdf?sequence=1), p.10

124 Finnish Government 2022, p.59

125 Finnish Government 2021, p. 19

The Government Report on Human Rights Policy(2022) emphasises support for women, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, sexual and gender minorities and human rights defenders. Finland's Africa Strategy emphasises the realisation of human rights, democracy, the rule of law, equality and women's rights at national, regional and global levels<sup>126</sup>. The Government Resolution on Finnish Democracy Policy mentions supporting the inclusion of women and vulnerable people and promoting multi-stakeholder dialogue as Finland's particular strength in international democracy work<sup>127</sup>.

In terms of operational approaches, the guidelines place particular emphasis on international policy and support for vulnerable groups. Finland expresses its support for the promotion of democracy in international and bilateral political dialogue<sup>128</sup>. The Africa Strategy identifies democracy and support for African democracy actors<sup>129</sup> as one of the issues to be promoted in the dialogue with African countries and the African Union. Support for human rights defenders is highlighted in a number of policies and documents, including the Report on Development Policy across Parliamentary Terms (2021)<sup>130</sup>.

Democracy is a key element in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2030 Agenda guides all development policies. Its preparatory phase has been seen as democratic and participatory in nature<sup>131</sup>, but the themes of democracy and citizen participation are not particularly strong in the Agenda itself. The most

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*Government Report on Foreign and Security Policy states that the value-based foundation of Finland's foreign and security policy is respect for and promotion of human rights, democracy and the rule of law.*

126 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2021) Finland's Africa Strategy. Towards a stronger economic and political partnership. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162950/VN\\_2021\\_19.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/162950/VN_2021_19.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), p.6

127 Finnish Government 2022, p.62

128 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2014, p.5

129 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2021, p.8

130 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2021b, p.8

131 Fox, O., & Stoett, P. (2016). Citizen participation in the UN sustainable development goals consultation process: towards global democratic governance. *Global Governance* 22(4): 555-574.

relevant goals in terms of democracy are<sup>132</sup> sub-goals 5.5<sup>133</sup>, 10.2<sup>134</sup> and 16.7<sup>135</sup>. The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy, on the other hand, emphasises support for the rule of law<sup>136</sup>, a commitment to promoting accountable and transparent democratic institutions<sup>137</sup>, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making<sup>138</sup>, deeper engagement with and support for an independent and diverse civil society<sup>139</sup> and diplomacy for democracy<sup>140</sup>.

The Finnish development policy's civil society policy was adopted in 2017. According to this policy, global developments in recent years have shown the need to actively defend the freedom of action of civil societies<sup>141</sup>, as well as the importance of freedom of information and expression for the ability of civil societies to function<sup>142</sup>. Strengthening civil societies in developing countries is recognised as an important development policy objective for Finland<sup>143</sup>. Finnish organisations are considered well-placed to promote dialogue between local government and civil society actors<sup>144</sup>.

Supporting the activities of NGOs is in itself seen as strengthening civic space. Finnish NGOs are, therefore, seen as key actors in strengthening civil societies in developing countries. The government report on human rights policy also states that Finland supports civil society and human rights defenders by providing support for their projects<sup>145</sup>.

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132 In addition, sub-goals 16.3 justice for all, 16.5 anti-corruption, 16.6 effective, accountable, transparent institutions and 16.10 access to information can be mentioned.

133 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

134 Empower and promote the social, economic and political inclusion of all, irrespective of age, sex, disability, race, ethnicity, origin, religion or economic or other status.

135 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels

136 EEAS 2020, p. 16

137 EEAS 2020, p. 19

138 EEAS 2020, p. 20

139 EEAS 2020, p. 24

140 EEAS 2020, p. 30

141 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017, p.6

142 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017, p.7

143 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017, p.8

144 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017, p. 11

145 Finnish Government 2021 p. 13

The human rights policy report states that Finland will work within intergovernmental organisations to strengthen the opportunities for participation and consultation of NGOs and promote meaningful participation of civil society in the activities of international organisations and negotiation processes<sup>146</sup>, , for example by inviting civil society representatives to delegations representing Finland and by providing financial support for the participation of Finnish civil society in international meetings.<sup>147</sup> In addition, the MFA has separate guidelines for supporting the activities of human rights defenders<sup>148</sup>. The human rights policy report also states Finland's support for the conditions for human rights defenders and environmental human rights defenders<sup>149</sup>.

## Administration

Finland's democracy work is administratively dispersed among numerous departments and units. The MFA has a Senior Specialist in Rule of Law, Democracy and Good Governance (KEO-02), who reports to the Deputy Director General, and an inspector responsible for the ministry's support to democracy organisations (Demo Finland, Rule of Law Centre, International IDEA, Community of Democracies). The Unit for Sectoral Policy (KEO-20) has advisers on democracy and good governance, gender equality and innovation and digitalisation, who provide advisory services to the ministry's management, units and legations, prepare guidance and promote Finland's development policy objectives in international negotiations and meetings. The Unit for Civil Society (KEO-30) is responsible for NGO relations and funding. All its activities are linked to a broad-sense concept of democracy. The Unit for Civil Society develops the civil society work of the MFA, is responsible for NGO relations and funding, and monitors the state of civil society and its capacities in the Global South. The Unit for UN Development and Innovation Issues (KEO-40) is responsible for Finland's advocacy work, cooperation and funding in UN development programmes, including innovation and digital cooperation.

Within the Political Department, the Unit for Human Rights Policy (POL-40) is responsible for democracy issues in international and regional organisations and, with certain provisos, human rights policy as a whole is linked to democracy issues. The Unit for Human Rights Policy includes a Human Rights Ambassador. The Policy Department is responsible for funding international human rights organisations<sup>150</sup>, Finland's work in EU<sup>151</sup>, OSCE and UN human rights bodies. The department also coordinates activi-

146 Finnish Government 2021, p. 47

147 Finnish Government 2021, p. 22

148 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2014b) Finnish Foreign Ministry's public guidelines on the practical implementation of the European Union Guidelines on Human Rights Defenders. [https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/suomen\\_ulkosaianhallinnon\\_julkiset\\_ohjeet\\_euroopan\\_unionin\\_ihmisoikeuspuolustajia\\_koskevien\\_suuntaviivojen\\_k%C3%A4yt%C3%A4nn%C3%B6n/2ba85ab6-8e88-83c3-d8cd-0d2305a7c93b?t=1525859717766](https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/suomen_ulkosaianhallinnon_julkiset_ohjeet_euroopan_unionin_ihmisoikeuspuolustajia_koskevien_suuntaviivojen_k%C3%A4yt%C3%A4nn%C3%B6n/2ba85ab6-8e88-83c3-d8cd-0d2305a7c93b?t=1525859717766)

149 Finnish Government 2021, p.38-41

150

151 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017, p.5

ties in the 3rd Committee of the UN General Assembly, which also covers democracy issues. Within the Political Affairs Department, the Unit for Human Rights Policy plays a key role, but also the Unit for UN and General Global Affairs (POL-50), which is responsible for general UN issues, and the Peace Mediation Centre (POL-60) are relevant for democracy.

Democracy promotion also takes place in the MFA's regional departments, particularly those for Africa and the Middle East, the Americas and Asia, and the East. Their tasks include political, trade, commercial-economic and development issues related to bilateral relations, EU external relations and multilateral institutions for the countries of the region. Since 2022, support for international election observation has been housed in the Crisis Management Centre (CMC) under the Ministry of Interior.

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*Development policy and diplomacy work most clearly together in the delegations where development cooperation is taking place.*

The distinction between development and foreign policy is sometimes blurred, especially in the context of advocacy and international fora. Both development and foreign policy activities include lobbying in OECD and UN contexts. The division of labour between the departments is also changing: for example with activities in IDEA and the Community of Democracies having been recently transferred from the political department to the development department.

Development policy and diplomacy work most clearly together in the delegations where development cooperation is taking place. In this case, diplomacy and development are naturally part of the same organisation. Delegations also prepare country programmes and strategies. Country programmes guide development cooperation, its planning, implementation and monitoring,

as well as development policy advocacy. Country strategies cover the objectives for Finland's overall operations in the partner country. The strategies cover political and trade relations, development cooperation, mediation and closer cooperation between different forms of cooperation, such as development cooperation, humanitarian aid and peace-building.

The distinction between human rights and democracy can pose administrative challenges when one is the remit of the political department and the other of the development department. In practice, activities related to the same themes may suffer from difficulties in communication for purely administrative reasons when they are categorised differently. For example, the Minister for Foreign Affairs is the minister responsible for

activities in UN human rights fora, while democracy support is the responsibility of the Minister for Trade and Development. The fragmentation of the administration is being debated within the MFA, and efforts are being made to reform it. The extent to which reform projects will improve the situation for democracy work is not yet certain.

Continuity of governance and resourcing is a separate issue. Democratic activity is carried out with a very small staff. In addition, the Ministry for Foreign Affairs has a large number of people who have served the organisation for a long time on temporary contracts. Some contracts have recently been left unrenewed and posts unfilled in anticipation of the reform of the foreign service and budget cuts in development cooperation. Indeed, development funding is facing significant cuts during this government term, and Finland currently has no clear plan to bring it in line with international commitments.

## Finnish funding to support democracy and civil society

Democracy support is difficult to define<sup>152</sup>: there are different approaches to it, just like democracy itself. Different countries also have different ways of calculating the amount of democracy support. For example, election observation is sometimes counted as part of democracy support, sometimes not. This makes it difficult to make international comparisons.

In practice, democracy support can refer to support for core democratic functions such as elections and related governance, or to support for democratic activities, participation and democratic culture in the broad sense. For example, Demo Finland, a political party democracy cooperation organisation, looks at democracy support funding through four sectors of development funding: law and justice development, strengthening civil society, elections, legislatures and political parties, and free flow of information. Finland, among the cohort of donors, is also making choices about how much to invest in democracy support, understood in both narrow and broad senses, and what priorities to set within these conceptions of democracy.

The only precise definition that exists for the broadly understood concept of democracy is the OECD/DAC statistical Purpose Code 151, "Governance and Civil Society". The DAC has not specifically sought to define democracy support, so this is the best opportunity to generate internationally comparable statistics. For example, support for the party system, human rights work, organisational activities and the promotion of women's rights are reported under Purpose Code 151.

However, Purpose Code 151 is too broad for a definition of democracy support. This code also reports support to the police, prison and rescue services, for example, and now also to migration-related activities. In addition, the statistical purpose code is by its very nature an ex-post reporting exercise. Even if an activity is reported under a democracy support code, it is not necessarily designed and evaluated as democracy

152 Youngs et al. 2023, p. 22

support. It is often more appropriate to ask which activities are designed with the aim of developing democracy.

Some relevant activities may also be excluded from these statistics. Firstly, the amounts for the DAC purpose codes do not include funding for international organisations, even if they have activities that fall under the purpose code. Although Finland does not currently fund democracy projects directly through international organisations, it is a major contributor to the core funding of UN Women, for example, covering about 10 per cent of core funding<sup>153</sup>. In recent years, Finland's democracy work has specifically focused on ensuring women's political participation<sup>154</sup>. In the past, democracy projects have also been funded through UNDP. Secondly, some activities may be relevant to democracy even if they are not recorded in this category. These include, for example, Finland's support to peace mediation and peace dialogues, which can be done with political parties without being registered as democracy work.

There may be pressure in democracy support to focus on core issues of democracy, such as political parties and elections, or at least to make some clear distinction between such 'core' functions and other democracy-related functions. The risk of broad democracy support is that it can become an external label attached to a wide range of projects, blurring the meaning of democracy support as a whole. On the other hand, in many situations, support for equality and civil society, for example, is at the heart of democracy promotion. Iran and Sudan, for example, have recently shown how women's movements can play a key role in promoting democratic change by demanding rights and, at the same time, broader social reforms<sup>155</sup>. It would be extraordinary if such movements were not recognised as important actors in the promotion of democracy.

Statistics from the European Democracy Hub show that Finland's democracy support has fallen from just over €70 million in 2014 to just under €40 million in 2020, although the biggest drop was already in 2015-2016, after which the amounts have been steady. By far the largest in the narrow definition of democracy is support for "justice and the rule of law", but this has fallen from €13.6 million in 2014 to 3.4-5 million from 2015 onwards. Other amounts of support for democracy, narrowly understood, are small. Support for political parties was the highest in the period under review in 2020, at €0.98m. Support for the strengthening of parliaments peaked at €0.74 million in 2017 and support for elections at €2 million in 2019, compared to, for example, Sweden, where support for the rule of law amounts to €20-30 million a year and support for the strengthening of parliaments to more than €10 million a year.

In 2020, Finland's total democracy support, as defined by the European Democracy Hub, will be €37.14 million, compared to Sweden (€560.7 million), the Netherlands (€357.6 million) or Denmark (€152.7 million). Of Finland's total development cooperation (€1 119 million, of which €708 million was managed by the MFA in 2020), democracy support accounts for around 5%. Although this is a small figure, it is not a particularly small sector. Currently, there is significant pressure to cut Finland's development funding.

153 Department for Foreign Affairs (2022) Development Policy Performance Report. <https://um.fi/web/kehityspolitiikan-tulosraportti-2022/johdanto>, p.31

154 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022, p. 46

155 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2023, p.16

Finland reported payments for the DAC Purpose Code in 2022 of around USD 88 million. Of this, the largest expenditure categories were support to public sector policy and administration<sup>156</sup> (about \$19 million) and public financial management<sup>157</sup> (about \$12 million). The total amount of activities reported under this purpose code has ranged from \$51 million to \$91 million over the past decade. The sub-category "democratic inclusion and civil society"<sup>158</sup>, has seen the largest variation, falling from \$38.8 million at its peak in 2011 to \$5.4 million in 2022.

## The narrow and broad dimensions of democracy in Finnish support

A narrow definition here means focusing on parliamentary and electoral institutions. Such a definition allows the statistics to distinguish activities that fall under the narrow definition. For example, the European Democracy Hub statistics can distinguish between narrowly interpreted democracy support by including the categories of support for political parties, strengthening parliaments and electoral support. In the period 2014-2020 covered by the statistics, this support has totalled \$0.4 million for Finland. In comparison, Sweden has spent \$145.9 million, the Netherlands \$37.7 million, and Denmark \$32.1 million over the same period. Finland stands out among these countries in the category of support for political parties, a category not found in other countries. If we add rule of law support to the figures, they are clearly higher, but the funding ratios of the countries remain unchanged in practice.

In Finland, there is a separate budget line for support for democracy and the rule of law to ensure the funding and continuity of democracy work. In the 2022 budget, €3 million of the total development cooperation budget (€1.34 billion) was earmarked

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156 Public sector policy and administrative management

157 Public finance management

158 Democratic participation and civil society

for this item, which provided support to Demo Finland, the Rule of Law Centre and International IDEA. This was not intended to be the only channel for democracy support in the narrow sense, but rather a support line for specific actors, created to signal a specific commitment to democracy and rule of law work. On the other hand, under the democracy support budget, multiannual programmes must be managed on the basis of annual financing decisions.

Beyond this item, support has been given to the development of the rule of law, but also to political parties. Other OSCE-related activities have also been financed in Eastern European countries. Development cooperation funds have been used in particular to finance the development of the rule of law, although the level of funding has not been high. In 2022, disbursements (under DAC codes 15130, 15151, 15152) totalled around 6 million, including rule of law, democracy and human rights work in Eritrea, Tanzania, Lebanon, Syria, Myanmar, Central Asia and Ukraine.

Among other organisations, the NGO human rights Foundation KIOS was created to promote human rights as one of its core missions, with projects related to the development of the rule of law and democracy. KIOS funds activities to promote democracy, for example through projects aimed at training and supporting (empowering) women as political actors. Political empowerment can take the form, for example, of standing as a candidate in both local and national elections. In addition, policies to support informed political decision-making and participation can be supported. For example, there are activities with underprivileged women in Nepal. Other Finnish NGOs are also working with similar impact and results in their programme countries.

They may also have projects to work with the parties and develop dialogue between them. For example, just under a third (around €2 million in 2022) of the work of the conflict resolution organisation CMI - Martti Ahtisaari Peace Foundation, which receives programme funding, can be counted as democracy support. This includes work to promote dialogue with political parties and other political actors, as well as projects that use the perspectives of civil society actors to broaden understanding of the social implications of the peace process, such as women's inclusion. The democracy work promoted with Finnish funding accounts for 16 per cent of CMI's total budget. Finnish-funded democracy projects support stability and peace in the Southern Caucasus, Libya, Yemen and Sudan and strengthen women's political agency.<sup>159</sup>

In the narrow sense, democracy support can also include election observation, which is currently organised by the Ministry of the Interior. In 2022, 35 election observers were deployed, of which about a third to EU missions (effectively the Global South)<sup>160</sup>. The annual budget for election observation is €300 000, the majority of which is spent on OSCE election observers, as they are paid for by member states. As a rule, the European Commission (Foreign Policy Instruments) is responsible for the costs of EU election observation. Resources are also used for recruitment and training.

In addition, in particular, the NGO projects fund support for freedom of expression and community-level participation. Organisations are guided to support democracy in

159 Information on CMI was obtained from the CMI office.

160 <https://www.cmcfinland.fi/kansainvaliset-vaalitarkkailutehtavat/>

the broad sense, even in projects that are not directly related to democracy. They must justify at the funding application stage and in the annual reporting how the project to be funded will support the capacity of the Global South partner and the state of civil society. In Finland, however, the starting point is that organisations have much autonomy in defining their field of action and do what they do best. This means that organisations cannot or do not want to be forced to promote democracy, but rather that they are guided more indirectly. Moreover, unlike in some donor countries, there are no specific thematic funding applications, for example around the theme of democracy.

## Rule of Law Centre

*The Rule of Law Centre* is part of the Faculty of Law at the University of Helsinki. The Centre started operating in August 2021 with 3-4 staff and a budget of €1.4 million. The centre involves experts in rule of law projects through a so-called expert mission. This approach will enable the use of high-level Finnish legal expertise in the projects. The centre's projects often work in cooperation with established actors, such as UN agencies. Some projects may also work closely with other organisations. In Uzbekistan, for example, Finland is funding UNDP's work on strengthening the rule of law and the Rule of Law Centre works alongside a UNDP project there. According to the centre's strategy, its thematic priorities are strengthening institutional integrity and/or strengthening legal security. The centre uses a broad definition of the rule of law based on the interconnection between the rule of law, democracy and human rights. In its work, it emphasises the importance of civil society, academia, the media and anti-corruption activities in strengthening the rule of law.

The projects aim to improve the quality of rule of law education, fight corruption and increase the transparency of political funding. The objectives also include training women in the rule of law and strengthening civil society. The Rule of Law Centre also emphasises the production of information to demonstrate the benefits of the rule of law and says that through project work it gathers information on the best approaches to supporting rule of law structures in different contexts.

## Demo Finland

*Demo Finland* is a cooperation organisation of all parliamentary parties. It works to promote democracy by strengthening the political participation of women, young people and people with disabilities in particular, and by supporting inter-party dialogue. The organisation is owned and controlled by the parties themselves, but in practice it receives most of its funding from the MFA. Demo Finland carries out projects in developing countries. It does not do this itself, but seeks local and reliable partners to realise the projects.

Demo Finland aims to promote strategic and inclusive party activity, involvement in multi-stakeholder dialogue and commitment to democracy support. Demo Finland's activities strengthen equal opportunities for participation, cross-party constructive cooperation, pluralistic political debate and the ability of politicians to peacefully influence social developments. Particular priorities are supporting the inclusion of groups underrepresented in politics, such as women, young people and people with disabilities, inter-party dialogue and strengthening the programmatic work of political parties. Project activities will focus on promoting understanding of democratic principles, multiparty dialogue and political education and participation of vulnerable groups. Demo Finland is currently active in Ethiopia, Kenya, Mozambique, Myanmar, Zambia, Sri Lanka, Tunisia and Zambia.

## 4. Questions and considerations

### Global challenges

The deterioration of democracy at the global level forces us to evaluate democracy support from a new perspective. As democracy weakens, strategies and interventions may take different forms. Development policy is also becoming less important as dependence on development funding from DAC countries has decreased. As authoritarian actors also tend to have alternatives to DAC funding, human rights and democracy conditionality is easier to resist.

A report evaluating democracy support in Sweden concludes that, both now and in the past, support has been more effective in supporting democratisation than in preventing the rise of authoritarianism.<sup>161</sup> Strengthening democracy requires different instruments in the context of strengthening and weakening democracy. The problem with current development cooperation is that the instruments are almost entirely geared to the conditions of a strengthening democracy or to supporting transitions from authoritarian to democratic conditions. These instruments work much less well in conditions of declining democracy, where more subtle approaches are

161 Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2020, p. 38

required<sup>162</sup>. At best, ways can be found to create positive spirals in which the strengthening elements of democracy support each other<sup>163</sup>. On the other hand, under no circumstances is democracy support intended to “export” democracy, and even the strongest states do not have the capacity to do so<sup>164</sup>. These attempts have ended in grave mistakes, as the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan show. It is, therefore, important that aid strengthens existing democratic institutions, practices and aspirations.

OECD analysis has found that at the global level, the level of development finance does not respond to a deterioration in democracy. While democratisation can be seen to consistently increase development finance, no such consistent response or impact can be observed after an authoritarian turnaround<sup>165</sup>. In general, the state of democracy would not seem to significantly explain the level of development finance<sup>166</sup>. According to one OECD study, inconsistent changes in development finance after authoritarian transitions suggest that donors lack a strategy to respond to democratic deterioration and that responses hinge on other foreign policy factors<sup>167</sup>.

Development funding for authoritarian states increased between 2010 and 2019. For humanitarian aid, the increase was as much as 19-fold over that period. In general, development funding to closed autocracies increased by 178%, in particular as funding to state institutions increased. Aid to “electoral autocracies”<sup>168</sup> increased by 41%, in particular due to an increase in funding for infrastructure. At the same time, aid to more democratic states decreased<sup>169</sup>.

However, this is not about active decisions on the direction of aid but about continuing cooperation as the state slips away from democracy. Support to authoritarian states is greater because there are more of them. Donors have therefore continued to operate in countries where they know the environment well, and where democracy has deteriorated.

In many respects, such a long-term approach is justified. For example, Finland's development cooperation country programmes are seen as examples of long-term cooperation that adapts to change where necessary<sup>170</sup>. For example, the country programmes have made it possible to target support to multilateral organisations and actors promoting democracy. According to an evaluation of Finland's human rights-based development policy, the country programmes have also been relatively

162 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, pp. 56-57

163 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, pp. 50-52

164 E.g. Galbreath, D.J. (2012). Securitizing Democracy and Democratic Security, *Democracy and Security* 8 (1), pp. 28-42.

165 OECD (2022). Official development assistance by regime context (2010-19). OECD development policy papers no. 44. Paris: OECD publishing, p.54

166 OECD 2022, p.22

167 OECD 2022, p.64

168 The classifications “closed autocracies”, “electoral autocracies”, “electoral democracies”, and “liberal democracies” were used. For a breakdown see Lührmann, A., Tanneberg, M. & Lindberg, S. (2018). Regimes of the World (RoW): Opening avenues for the comparative study of political regimes. *Politics and Governance* 6 (1). <https://doi.org/10.17645/pag.v6i1.1214>.

169 OECD 2022, p.21-22

170 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022

successful in promoting human rights<sup>171</sup>. However, the current government programme envisages a shift in focus away from bilateral intergovernmental country programmes towards development cooperation by domestic NGOs<sup>172</sup>.

Without a declared criterion for the state of democracy and/or without a strategy to respond to democratic deterioration, the continuation of operating in familiar environments has led to an increasing global support to authoritarian regimes<sup>173</sup>. Non-democratic priorities, such as support to fragile states, may also have led to a shift in support to undemocratic regimes, even when democracy promotion is included in the guidelines for support to fragile states<sup>174</sup>. However, it is questionable whether the relationship with democracy was visible in these guidelines and whether the choice between these priorities was conscious.

It is also important to consider how not to further damage the enduring democratic practices in authoritarian countries, given the desire and ability of many regimes to consolidate their power by exploiting anti-Western sentiments<sup>175</sup>.

## The human rights-based approach and democracy

A particular challenge in evaluating Finland's democracy support is that, although Finland backs democracy-related activities and also considers them to be an important priority, the word democracy itself is used more sparingly. Themes that fall within the broad definition of democracy are framed around human rights and human rights-based approaches. Activities that could justifiably be considered as democracy work can thus be categorised as human rights activities. Human rights in general are an integral part of the broad concept of democracy.

Finland's development and foreign policy have been based on a human rights-based approach. This approach is a general one that guides action based on the principles of universality, interdependence, indivisibility, accountability, transparency, equality and non-discrimination, participation and inclusion<sup>176</sup>. Therefore, it is a more general and comprehensive approach to human rights work than the more specific one. The human rights-based approach also justifies support for civil society participation and the expansion/maintenance of the civil society space.

Finland's approach to human rights and democracy work as a whole can be

171 Christoplos, I. et al. (2023). Evaluation of human rights-based approach (HRBA) in Finland's development policy and co-operation. Evaluation of Finland's development policy and co-operation 2023:5. Volume 1: Main report. Helsinki: Ulkoministeriö. <https://um.fi/documents/384998/0/Evaluation+report+Volume+1+-+Main+report+%281%29.pdf/3c31e625-861a-0620-1181-61a43c938005?i=1698219364711>

172 Government (2023) Strong and Committed Finland. Petteri Orpo's Government Programme. <https://valtioneuvosto.fi/hallitukset/hallitusohjelma#/10.2>

173 OECD 2022

174 OECD (2007) Principles for good international engagement in fragile states and situations. <https://www.oecd.org/dac/conflict-fragility-resilience/docs/38368714.pdf>; Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2014c) Finland's development policy and development cooperation in fragile states - Guidelines for strengthening implementation of development cooperation [https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/finlands\\_development\\_policy\\_in\\_fragile\\_states](https://um.fi/documents/35732/48132/finlands_development_policy_in_fragile_states)

175 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, pp. 27-28

176 Christoplos et al. 2023

assessed from different perspectives. On the one hand, the emphasis on human rights, despite overlaps, is not entirely congruent with the promotion of democracy. An evaluation of the human rights-based approach suggests that it has been most successful in building the capacity and voice of rights-holders, but with a focus on the local level and less on structures, with less attention to political accountability<sup>177</sup>. The Development Policy Results Report<sup>178</sup> notes that Finland's democracy work in recent years has focused on women's political participation and on securing the work and capacity of civil society. In contrast, the strengthening of justice systems has played a lesser role in recent years. There is a risk that the emphasis on human rights means neglecting support for the core functions of democracy.

On the other hand, the emphasis on human rights can be seen as Finland's expertise and a natural contribution to the promotion of democracy. As a small player, Finland also has to prioritise, and in any case democracy should be understood more broadly than its narrow definition. The evaluation on human rights-based approaches recommends that the human rights-based approach should continue to be the guiding principle of Finnish development cooperation<sup>179</sup> and that Finnish democracy support can also be built within this framework. Finland also mentions gender equality and equal participation as a specific priority for democracy support, which is very much in line with the human rights-based approach. Conversely, the difficulties of human rights and democracy are often shared: undemocratic rule is very often accompanied by an attempt to prevent the realisation of human rights, especially in the case of women's and sexual and gender minority rights<sup>180</sup>.

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177 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022

178 Ulkoministeriö 2022

179 Christoplos et al. 2023

180 Valtioneuvosto 2021, s. 15

## The value of democracy

The actual weight of democracy in the overall development policy can also vary. Democracy may be supported in principle but not prioritised in practice. The erosion of democracy may also be overshadowed by other threats, such as the destabilisation of the rule-based system (Futures Review of the Ministries 2022<sup>181</sup>) or climate change, pandemics, populism, migration, conflict and hybrid influence (Government Report on Finnish Foreign and Security Policy)<sup>182</sup>.

Traditional thinking in development and foreign policy may also ignore democracy issues. For example, the Development Policy Outcome Report 2022 states that Finland needs to diversify its relations, especially with partner countries that are emerging from the least developed countries to the lower middle-income countries<sup>183</sup>. However, nothing is said about the diversification of relations in the context of the strategy for promoting democracy. The Africa strategy stresses good cooperation with governments and the need for good political relations to promote cooperation in the economic, trade and development fields<sup>184</sup>. This may raise questions about the approach to authoritarian regimes.

Defending democracy is not just about taking positions, but about actively promoting them. Finland may be perceived as a reliable supporter of democracy but not necessarily as a particularly proactive democracy actor. Bold and vocal openings and views are also needed in international fora. This also includes setting an example: for example, the (declining) presence of civil society in official international delegations is always a signal of civil society's appreciation. Organisations expect Finland to do better in this respect. Action to promote the genuine impact of NGO hearings, which are currently often held only after meetings, would also be important.

In the wake of several recent crises, notably the war of aggression in Russia, the debate on democracy has moved more clearly into the context of foreign and security policy. While support for Ukraine is perceived as a defence of democracy, the focus of the debate is on security policy: there is talk of "securitising" democracy<sup>185</sup>. More generally, one may ask whether democracy is in some situations subordinate to foreign and security policy or a reason to promote security policy goals. For example, Finland's Africa strategy also states that Finland approaches the issue of peace and security holistically from a broad security perspective. In this thinking, democracy is also seen as a tool for more sustainable security<sup>186</sup>.

181 Finnish Government (2022b) Ministerial Outlook 2022: The State of Society and Issues Requiring Decisions. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164320/VN\\_2022\\_58.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/164320/VN_2022_58.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y)

182 Finnish Government 2020

183 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2022

184 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2021, p.5

185 Youngs et al. 2023, p.1-4

186 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2021, p.7

## Coherence

In development policy, it is important to ensure coherence between different policies. Officially, Finland is committed to promoting democracy consistently. For example, according to the Report on Development Policy across Parliamentary Terms, Finland is working in a comprehensive and coherent manner to promote peaceful and democratic societies based on the rule of law and good governance. Development policy is defined as "Finland's consistent activities in all those sectors of international cooperation and national policy that have an impact on the status of developing countries"<sup>187</sup>. The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy also stresses the need for coherence in human rights and democracy across all areas of EU external action (trade, environment, development, counter-terrorism)<sup>188</sup>. The lack of coherence between foreign and security policy (or "geostrategic factors") and democracy has been acknowledged internationally<sup>189</sup>, and Finland is not necessarily an exception.

In the case of democracy support, coherence can refer to the consistency between different policies or between national and international democracy policies. The former raises the question of whether all policy areas are in fact working towards the same objective, the latter the question of possible differences in emphasis between domestic and foreign policies.

The question of coherence between policies can be raised firstly within development policy. In particular, economic conditionality has meant a narrowing of the local democratic space, even if it could be seen as well-founded. In Finland, too, development cooperation has been credited with "helping many developing countries to implement necessary structural economic reforms"<sup>190</sup>. Often these structural reforms have been dictated to the recipient countries. The technical understanding of development cooperation has also been shown to serve as a tool for hiding the political dimension, which tends to reduce democracy<sup>191</sup>. The focus on measurable results has obscured necessary policy choices. On the other hand, there has recently been a growing understanding of the importance of actual economic policy space. This is reflected in particular in the growing emphasis on fiscal capacity building in development policy, including in the context of democracy.

There can also be tensions between development policy and other foreign policies. In particular, the relationship between trade policy and democracy can be complex. While accountability issues are present in trade policy (notably in the work of the State Department's Sustainable Trade Unit KPO-30 and in export controls), democracy

187 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2021b, p.2

188 EEAS 2020, p.9

189 Cheeseman & Desrosiers, p.8

190 Reinikka, R. (2015) Tuottaako kehitysyhteistyö tuloksia? Riippumaton arvio Suomen kehitysyhteistyön tuloksellisuudesta ja vaikuttavuudesta. (Does development cooperation deliver results? Independent evaluation of the effectiveness and efficiency of Finnish development cooperation. In Finnish) [https://um.fi/documents/384998/385866/finskipr%C3%A5kiig\\_sammanfattning\\_\\_tuottaako\\_kehitysyhteisty%C3%B6\\_tuloksia\\_/1a5ff528-f67f-2987-5c92-adcc8e-3c027a?i=1528280722335](https://um.fi/documents/384998/385866/finskipr%C3%A5kiig_sammanfattning__tuottaako_kehitysyhteisty%C3%B6_tuloksia_/1a5ff528-f67f-2987-5c92-adcc8e-3c027a?i=1528280722335), p.4

191 E.g. Ferguson, J. (1990). The anti-politics machine. "Development", depoliticization and bureaucratic power in Lesotho. Cambridge: Cambridge university press.

and its promotion are not necessarily part of accountability practices. Moreover, the emphasis on democracy issues is hardly visible in activities such as Team Finland, especially when building trade relations.

Activities by different institutions can also vary. An evaluation of the human rights-based approach found that Finland's commitment to human rights is strongly visible within the UN, but less so in the context of international financial institutions<sup>192</sup>. It may

be asked whether similar challenges exist in democracy promotion.

In addition to coherence between different activities, there is also a need to ensure coherence between Finland's national and international democracy work, as also stated in the Democracy Support Guideline<sup>193</sup>. Finland has explicitly stated that it wishes to set a positive example of the possibilities for dialogue between civil society actors and the state<sup>194</sup>.

In some cases, threats to democracy in particular may be described differently in national and development and foreign policy documents. For example, the Report on Development Policy across Parliamentary Terms, 2021<sup>195</sup> and the Women,

Peace and Security Action Plan<sup>196</sup> link the challenges to democracy to authoritarian countries, while national democracy policies identify threats to democracy such as hate speech<sup>197</sup>, extremism, inequality in social participation, erosion of trust<sup>198</sup>, disinformation and populism. These concerns are not so much raised in the context of development policy, although they are equally relevant in developing countries. For example, research shows that populism is a key challenge in many countries of the Global South<sup>199</sup>. The Youth, Peace and Security agenda<sup>200</sup> also provides a perspective on

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192 Christoplos et al. 2023

193 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2014, p.5

194 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2017, p. 3

195 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2021b

196 Ministry for Foreign Affairs 2023 , p.11

197 Government 2022, p. 28

198 Government 2022, p.16-18

199 Juego, B. (2023) The Duterte phenomenon as authoritarian populism in the Philippines. In D. B. Subedi, H. Brasted, K. V. Strokirch, & A. Scott (Eds.), *The Routledge Handbook of Populism in the Asia Pacific* (pp. 270-287). Routledge.

200 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2021 c) Youth, peace and security. Finland's National Action Plan 2021-2024. [https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163334/UM\\_2021\\_05.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://julkaisut.valtioneuvosto.fi/bitstream/handle/10024/163334/UM_2021_05.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), p.21

the opportunities and challenges of digitalisation for democracy and inclusion. Digitalisation can support inclusiveness, but this inclusiveness can remain superficial and suffer from technological accessibility gaps and cyberbullying that seriously threatens equality of inclusion.

The Government's decision of principle on Finnish democracy policy in the 2020s states that Finland is actively following the development of international democratic innovations<sup>201</sup>. DemoDemocratic innovations include the citizens' initiative and strong local democracy<sup>202</sup>. These aspects of democracy are rarely mentioned in the context of development policy, although it is precisely the new possibilities of democracy that should be highlighted.

There has also been a debate in Finland about the effective autonomy of civil society. There are fears that the organisations will turn to self-censorship for fear of running out of funding: the state may also indirectly restrict civil society's scope for action. A strong project orientation is also seen as undermining the functioning and effective freedom of organisations<sup>203</sup>. A similar debate is rarely held in the field of development policy, and the only contributions on the subject have come from organisations<sup>204</sup>.

## Effectiveness and choices

There has not been enough systematic evaluation of democracy support to be able to say with any certainty about its effectiveness. As with human rights interventions, development projects and programmes are typically too short-lived to make a measurable difference, especially when it comes to cultural attitudes and behavioural change.<sup>205</sup> TuloResults are typically delayed and difficult to "isolate": it is almost impossible to demonstrate the impact of external support. This is particularly the case when the aim is to slow down the deterioration of democracy rather than to strengthen it<sup>206</sup>.

However, there are indications that aid is more likely to produce positive results when it directly targets democracy building<sup>207</sup>. Such support may even undermine authoritarian tendencies. There are also some results on the effectiveness of multilateral

201 Finnish Government 2022, p.31

202 Finnish Government 2022, p.32-33

203 Ruuskanen, P., Jousilahti, J., Faehnle, M., Kuusikko, K., Kuitinen, O., Virtanen, J. & Strömberg, L. (2020). Kansalaisyhteiskunnan tila ja tulevaisuus 2020-luvun Suomessa (The state and future of civil society in Finland in the 2020s. In Finnish), Valtioneuvoston selvitys- ja tutkimustoiminnan julkaisusarja 2020:47

204 E.g. Isomäki, R. (1999). Paljasjalkavallankumous – kymmenen vuotta myöhemmin. Kehitysmaiden kansalaisyhteiskunnat ja ulkomainen rahoitus Ympäristö ja kehitys ry:n projektiyhteistyön valossa. (The barefoot revolution - ten years later. Civil societies and foreign funding in developing countries in the light of the project cooperation of the Environment and Development Association. In Finnish) Helsinki: : Ympäristö ja kehitys

205 Christoplos et al. 2023

206 Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2020

207 Nieto-Matiz, C. & Schenoni, L.L. (2020). Backing despots? foreign aid and the survival of autocratic regimes. *Democracy and Security* 16(1), pp.36-58.

aid compared to bilateral aid<sup>208</sup>. At the EU level, democracy support has been found to have a general positive impact<sup>209</sup>.

Two levels of effectiveness can be distinguished. First, the level of investment in the overall theme, including democracy, civil society, and the rule of law. Second, how the different aspects of assistance, such as the rule of law, conflict resolution, and civil society support, work together and coherently. Strengthening the analysis of when to decentralise and when to centralise would also be useful.

Promoting democracy also involves the problem of the permanence of results. The results achieved may be tangible, but that does not mean that they cannot be lost. Democracy can always start to deteriorate. On the other hand, the time span for evaluating the results of democracy support can also be long: many effects are not only visible on a large scale, but also with a time lag.

All policies, and of course development policy too, should be effective. But too straightforward an understanding of effectiveness can paradoxically divert action away from the most important contributions. While effectiveness is itself part of a culture of good public spending, an emphasis on effectiveness can lead to a focus on measurability. Most democracy projects can show quantitative results, for example in terms of the number of people attending events. This can lead to a diversion of support away from democracy work where the results are less tangible but potentially more impactful. It may also be more tempting to direct support to situations where the work is easier and the results more visible, even if the need for

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*The results achieved may be tangible, but that does not mean that they cannot be lost. Democracy can always start to deteriorate.*

208 Birchler, K., Limpach, S., & Michaelowa, K. (2016). Aid modalities matter: the impact of different World Bank and IMF programs on democratization in developing countries. *International Studies Quarterly* 60(3):427-439. Poast, P. & Urpelainen, J. (2015). How international organizations support democratization: preventing authoritarian reversals or promoting consolidation? *World Politics* 67(1):72-113.

209 Gafuri, A. (2022). Can democracy aid improve democracy? *The European Union's democracy assistance 2002-2018, Democratization*, 29:5, 777-797, DOI: 10.1080/13510347.2021.2012654

support is particularly acute in difficult circumstances.

More information is needed as a basis for promoting democracy, and the collection of information needs to be developed in all democracy work. Evaluating effectiveness requires a combination of different types of data since collective impact is the result of synergy. Evaluation of democracy work can for example be based on 'outcome harvesting', looking for results from different sources during the process.

Finland regularly carries out evaluations of its development policy. Evaluations may be thematic, country, programme or meta-evaluations. An evaluation on democracy promotion is planned for 2024, the first democracy evaluation to be carried out by Finland. The closest thematic evaluation to this topic has been the evaluation of the human rights-based approach published in 2023.

Other evaluations carried out in the past do not tell us very much about democracy promotion. In the country-level evaluations, democracy themes do not stand out. This is also true for evaluations of countries with a difficult democratic situation, such as Vietnam<sup>210</sup>. The country evaluation on transition is limited to a brief statement of the need to continue the dialogue on democracy. Adding a democracy dimension to country evaluations could increase the weight of democracy issues and the understanding of the political situation and how to influence it.

## Targeting support

As democracy strengthens globally, and especially in the country where democracy work is carried out, even the analysis of project results yields useful information. In a context of declining democracy, however, questions need to be considered such as:

- Should development funding be targeted to reward democratisation?
- When does it become practically impossible to operate in the country and withdrawal is the best option?
- Is it more appropriate to promote democracy in difficult or slightly easier circumstances?

The strengthening of authoritarianism inevitably leads to problematic situations. It can be tempting to react to the rise of authoritarianism and the deterioration of civil society by seeking to disengage with authoritarian states, cut or minimise development funding and freeze relations in other ways. However, many studies<sup>211</sup> argue that this strategy is short-sighted. Even with undemocratic regimes, it is worth continuing dialogue, otherwise contacts will be lost altogether. This will make dialogue more difficult

210 Van Gerwen, F. et al. (2012). Evaluation on the Transition Process of Finnish-Vietnamese Cooperation in 2008-2020. Volume 1: Main Report. Evaluation on Finland's Development Policy and Cooperation 2021 / 5A [https://um.fi/documents/384998/0/Evaluation\\_Transition+of+Finnish-Vietnamese+Cooperation\\_VOL1\\_web+%283%29.pdf/9e7cba45-c1b8-c965-19aa-36699342eebf?i=1624341941972](https://um.fi/documents/384998/0/Evaluation_Transition+of+Finnish-Vietnamese+Cooperation_VOL1_web+%283%29.pdf/9e7cba45-c1b8-c965-19aa-36699342eebf?i=1624341941972)

211 Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. 2020. Policy Note: Governance in Authoritarian Contexts. <https://www.shareweb.ch/site/DDLGN/Documents/Policy%20Note%20AuthoritarianRegimes%20EN.pdf>. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA). 2018. Effective Donor Responses to the Challenge of Closing Civic Space. International Center for Not-for-Profit Law April. <https://www.icnl.org/wpcontent/uploads/Effective-donor-responses-FINAL-1-May-2018.pdf>

even if the situation improves, and authoritarian actors will fill the void.<sup>212</sup>

The countries where the deterioration of democracy is most severe and/or where democracy interventions would be most useful are not necessarily the poorest countries in the world, or otherwise particularly prioritised for development funding. Nor are they necessarily eligible for ODA. The most significant deterioration of democracy has occurred in middle-income countries (Latin America, Europe and Central Asia)<sup>213</sup>. In the context of development cooperation proper, it may not be possible to give the most appropriate weight to democracy promotion criteria.

Development donors, including Finland, should ask themselves how high a priority the promotion of democracy is. If other development or humanitarian considerations are perceived to be more important, the weighing-up should at least be done openly.

Finland's current government programme states that development cooperation is conditional on the recipient country being receptive to its own citizens and supporting the international rule-based order. According to the government programme, Finland will not distribute development aid to regimes or actors that support Russia's war in Ukraine<sup>214</sup>. Regardless of how broadly the policy is interpreted, such conditionality is inconsistent with the priorities of supporting democracy and conditionality on the basis of democratisation. The government's aims to shift the focus away from country programmes may also lead to undesirable solutions for democracy support.

Democracy support also raises dilemmas about what kind of imperfection is tolerated. Perfect democracy does not have to be achieved immediately, and in difficult circumstances even small steps forward matter. In the rule of law, for example, it is sometimes assumed that it is better to have some justice than no justice at all. For example, traditional dispute resolution can sometimes give rise to inclusive and human rights-friendly approaches. However, it is clear that any democratic shortcomings should not be seen as an opportunity.

Cooperation with civil society actors in an authoritarian country can also be difficult. Some NGOs may be very close to the government because of perceived compromises or otherwise. Virtually all authoritarian states have some form of NGOs, which are allowed to continue as long as the power of definition remains in the hands of the state apparatus<sup>215</sup>. It is, therefore, important to distinguish between *claim-making NGOs, nonprofits and loyal NGOs*<sup>216</sup> rather than speaking of civil society as a single entity.

The development of democracy can be perceived as understandably difficult in a situation of conflict or a serious corruption problem. On the other hand, it is undesirable to ignore those most in need in the name of demonstrating results. KIOS, for example, feels that it is precisely in difficult circumstances that human rights, democracy and civil

212 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, pp. 49-50

213 Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2020

214 Finnish Government 2023

215 Kontinen et al. 2022, p. 25

216 Toepler S., Zimmer, A., Fröhlich, C. & Obuch, K. (2020). The Changing Space for NGOs: Civil Society in Authoritarian and Hybrid Regimes. *Voluntas* 31, 649-662. Loyal organisations also include "government-organised non-governmental organisations" (GONGOs).

society activity must be promoted. The more such work is needed, the more important it is, and a challenging environment is not a reason to withdraw from it. Similarly, Demo Finland has continued its work in some countries where a sharp deterioration in democracy means that working with political parties is no longer possible. In Myanmar, for example, it has been possible to continue democracy training and dialogue events between democratic actors. In difficult circumstances, this has been seen as important, although it is unlikely to have a direct impact on the state of democracy in the prevailing circumstances.

States are also multifaceted in character. Sometimes, for example, there may be effective cooperation with local governments, even if the central government is highly authoritarian. In other situations, the practicalities of the situation stop. In Sri Lanka, for example, Demo Finland has helped to train and support a network of women local politicians, but the postponement of local elections and the resulting political vacuum have made it no longer meaningful to continue. Contexts can change rapidly. It will then have to be decided whether and whether it is possible to maintain the support of democratic actors and in what ways this can be done.

Finland does not have a clear set of criteria for when to withdraw from a country. For example, Nicaragua was withdrawn from when the situation in the country became difficult, although Finnish NGOs are still active in the country. In Nepal, Finland has remained beyond the difficult years of civil war. In Myanmar, we are operating despite the military rule. It is rare to build projects in very difficult circumstances, but protecting existing operations where possible can be valuable. Sometimes activities can continue quietly. On the other hand, some kind of criteria for withdrawal could be useful, so that the criteria for democracy support do not get lost in the "expediency" of foreign and security policy.

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## Strategicity

Supporting civil society is central to democracy support. However, it is a different matter of how, in addition to strengthening civil society's activities, the state of its functioning is strengthened.

Human rights, democracy and the rule of law form a whole or an “ecosystem” in which the parts interact. Within this whole, where particular problems exist in some countries can vary quite significantly from country to country. Sometimes, different authorities, sometimes civil movements, and sometimes, the judiciary can be a bulwark of democracy. Similarly, the weaknesses and, hence, the sites of intervention vary. There is also reason to fear that a weakening of civil society will drag other democratic structures down with it. On the other hand, for example, the relationship between support for good governance in Finland and democracy may be unclear. In principle, governance can also work well in an undemocratic system<sup>217</sup>, and this is not necessarily made clear in the context of aid.

Does Finland exercise sufficient strategic thinking in democracy promotion? Although there is a strong commitment in principle, there is not necessarily open and conscious thinking on the essential issues. How should democracy efforts be best targeted, what interventions and where should they be prioritised, and how should different states of democracy (fragile, declining, strengthening) be addressed? Without this kind of thinking, democracy promotion may not happen as intended. Strategic thinking also involves reflexivity. Authoritarian regimes do not passively accept interventions but are well aware that development actors seek to strengthen civil society and democracy. This must also be anticipated when planning aid.

Finland's current government programme emphasises a return to conditionality. However, this is clearly motivated by foreign policy. A more appropriate strategy for democracy support would be to identify different states and developments in democracy and tailor support accordingly rather than with political conditionality.

In Finland, support for the activities of organisations is not necessarily seen from the perspective of holistic support for democracy. Although there is much talk about democracy, support for civic space is not particularly visible, except for financial support for organisations. More visible support would require an investment in the concerted action of diplomacy and development policy, which is emphasised in international contexts<sup>218</sup>. On the other hand, for example, a report on support to civil society produced by the UniPID network of Finnish universities for the MFA estimates that Finland is doing political work to strengthen the space for civil society at both national and global levels but that this is less systematic and less visible than financial support<sup>219</sup>.

On a positive note, Finland believes that activity by civic organisations has a positive impact on the space for action. However, this is not a given. Some organisations are heavily focused on service provision, and their very important work does

217 Antila, Anna (2021) Finland's Democracy Support. Concept, motivation, and challenges. Pro grad thesis, Faculty of Management and Economics, University of Tampere.

218 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, p. 14

219 Kontinen et al. 2022, p. 67

not directly contribute to increasing the space for civil society. Reflecting on ways to respond to the shrinking space would require a more holistic analysis of the operating environments. Dialogue on the policy space could naturally be the role of the policy department, as it is of the development department, so this would also require a new form of interdepartmental cooperation.

International policy and literature can also be used to identify different policies and ask whether they could be better reflected in Finnish action. The EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy mentions *the need to develop tools* to warn of the first signs of the closure of civil society and the deterioration of democracy<sup>220</sup>. A report by the Westminster Foundation for Democracy stresses that cases of *slow democratic deterioration should be prioritised*, in particular because these cases have the most to gain<sup>221</sup>.

The Westminster Foundation for Democracy report also highlights that there are limits to the technical approach<sup>222</sup>. There is a tendency in development cooperation to think of it as apolitical and merely technical advice, whereas often, for example, economic policy advice has meant taking a position on highly political issues. On this basis, researchers have argued that economic policy thinking should take greater account of democracy<sup>223</sup>. The report argues for *a more open and inclusive approach to politics* in development policy<sup>224</sup>. In new EU programmes, funding conditions *allow support for civil society actors without the approval of partner country administrations*<sup>225</sup>.

## Theory of change and knowledge production

Strategic thinking is based on a clear understanding of how democratisation is expected to take place. In the research literature, democratisation theories are divided into structuralist, institutionalist and actor-based theories. Structuralist theories emphasise the links between major structures, such as the links between economic and political development. Institutional theories emphasise the importance of numerous institutions, such as political parties, the media, the judiciary, and so on<sup>226</sup>. Actor-oriented theories emphasise the role of individual actors, both activists and enlightened politicians.<sup>227</sup>

The theory of change that underpins democratic change includes an understanding of the types of interventions through which democracy is most likely to advance,

220 EEAS 2020, p. 14

221 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, pp. 55-56

222 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023

223 e.g. Couret Branco, M. (2016). Economics for substantive democracy. *Review of Social Economy* 74 (4): 369-389.

224 Cheeseman & Desrosiers 2023, pp. 52-53

225 Youngs et al. 2023, p. 22

226 Haggard, S. & Kaufman, R.R. (2016) Democratization During the Third Wave. *Annual Review of Political Science* 19: 125-144.

227 Niño-Zarazúa et al. 2020, p. 50

generally and locally. This also involves the question of the weight and mutual dynamics of external and internal factors in the democratisation process. At the extremes of these theories are the naïve belief in externally-led democracy (which has been badly shaken in Iraq and Afghanistan) and the pessimism that external actors can play no role in the process. The dynamics of democratisation are more complex than these. Internal and external pressures can also play different roles<sup>228</sup>. One must also always analyse whether the aim is to strengthen stable democracies, to support weak democracies, to prevent democratic deterioration or to create a foundation within autocracies.

Effective democracy support also requires country-specific analysis, including a clear understanding of the path to democracy in different countries. It would be necessary to identify where democracy support has the greatest impact, in terms of development or deterioration, and to analyse the interaction between internal and external factors<sup>229</sup>. In democracy, the parts contribute to the whole, and it is always necessary to identify which part undermines the whole. A discussion paper published by the German Development Ministry already in 2007 stated that it should be possible to move from ex-post evaluation of the effectiveness of democracy support to ex ante evaluation<sup>230</sup>.

Finland clearly has a well-defined theory of change<sup>231</sup>, but it does not directly address the mechanisms of democratisation, although it does mention the promotion of peace and democracy as one of its priorities. There has been some debate about updating the theory of change to emphasise democratic institutions as a sub-goal.

Political context analyses offer one way of analysing the contexts in which democracy support operates. Such an analysis examines, on a case-by-case basis, the political situation in the country, its recent developments, and the functioning and inclusiveness of the different institutions. They ask where the political situation is heading and how the various actors and their power relations are evolving. The key to these analyses is the identification of forces and actors rather than looking at democratic or authoritarian developments as a single phenomenon. They can also point to structural problems in the culture of inclusiveness. Such a case-by-case analysis can draw on a wide range of documents, but above all on interviews with actors identified as relevant. It is also necessary to draw on the knowledge and understanding of local partners and peer organisations. Sweden carries out such analyses systematically. The Finnish evaluation of the human rights-based approach also found that policy context analyses also provide a basis for understanding and assessing risks.<sup>232</sup>

The particular importance of strategicity lies in systematic thinking in relation to incremental change. When democracy is suddenly weakened, for example by military

228 Examples of different responses of democratization and women's status to external pressures Donno, D., Fox, S.L. & Kaasik, J.I. (2019). Compliance or Camouflage? Foreign Aid, International Norms, and Incentives for Women's Rights in Dictatorships. [https://www.peio.me/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/PEIO12\\_paper\\_30.pdf](https://www.peio.me/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/PEIO12_paper_30.pdf)

229 Gafuri 2022

230 Burnell, Peter (2007) Does International Democracy Promotion Work? German development institute discussion paper 17/2007. <https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/BurnellPromotionWork.pdf>

231 Ministry for Foreign Affairs (2022b). Theories of change and aggregate indicators for Finland's development policy. Helsinki.

232 Christoplos et al. 2023

coups, it is easier for the international community to react. Typically, cooperation with the regime is discontinued (although it may continue at the local level and/or through civic organisations). But democratic deterioration is much more often incremental. It is more difficult to know at what stage and how to react to such a deterioration. At times, even recognising a democratic deterioration can be challenging. Development policy should be able to identify subtle slides towards authoritarianism.

Information production also plays a role in the more ideological work of democracy. Authoritarianism also appeals to many groups. It can be seen as powerful and effective and can project anti-Western sentiments. The important question is, therefore, how to show that democracy is a path worth choosing. This also requires concrete evidence, especially as the benefits of democratic developments are slow and not always associated with democracy. One might ask whether the production of such evidence is seen as part of the work of democracy.

Neither the trends towards democracy nor towards authoritarianism are unanimous. All states have ideologies, actors and tendencies pulling in different directions<sup>233</sup>. Many countries are "sitting on the fence": it is an open question whether movements towards democracy or authoritarianism will take place, and the direction can be determined by very small factors.

233 On "spirals" that enhance human rights, see e.g. Risse, T. Ropp, S.C. & Sikink, K. (2013). Cambridge University Press.



## 5. Recommendations to parliament and the ministry for foreign affairs

### Supporting democracy requires a more comprehensive commitment from Finland

1. Recent studies show that direct democracy support is more effective than general development funding in achieving the positive change it seeks.<sup>234</sup> Therefore, Finland should invest in strengthening the relevance of democracy support, the criteria for granting democracy support and the monitoring mechanisms.
2. Democracy support must be seen as a whole, in which the state of democratic institutions, civil society and the rule of law interact. The starting point should be a comprehensive situation analysis, including risk and stakeholder analyses and strategic objectives.
3. The Government Programme (2023) should also be carefully considered from the perspective of democracy, human rights and the rule of law.
4. The reform of the MFA's administration must seek to strengthen the link between democracy and human rights work and ensure adequate human resources and skills development.

## More knowledge-based strategic guidance

5. Democracy support needs to develop strategic thinking. This requires the identification of local factors that trigger good and bad spirals of democratisation and the ability to target support. Learning to look for early warning signs of democratic decline and ways to respond to them, and better tailoring support to different types of governance.
6. Analyses of operating environments should be developed from a democratic perspective. In addition to academic research, the analytical capacity of organisations must be ensured. The Foreign Ministry's evaluation report on human rights in Finnish development policy and cooperation (2023) also recommends that the capacity of the Foreign Ministry and its partners to conduct human rights assessments, conflict and power analyses and monitoring mechanisms should be strengthened<sup>235</sup>.
7. Democracy impact assessment should be systematically integrated into country-specific evaluations so that it is part of the evaluation of Finland's development policy measures.
8. Expanding civic space must be pursued as a separate objective. The reasons for the narrowing of the space need to be analysed and the possibilities for Finland to act in such a way that the space expands sooner need to be explored. The state of civil society should be seen as a wider issue than support for organisations and their projects. This also requires cooperation between development and foreign policy.

## All policy areas must work in the same direction to support democracy

9. Finland should develop a clear set of criteria for determining when a country should be withdrawn from completely. This should take into account the scope for supporting non-governmental actors and, for example, local government.
10. The criteria for democracy support, like those for other areas of development policy, should not be based on other foreign policy considerations. Care must be taken with conditionality for democracy support so that it does not support undemocratic development. For example, withdrawing from bilateral work because of positions on Ukraine may also deepen the confrontation between the West and the developing world and increase the influence of Russia and other authoritarian countries globally.
11. Support for democracy must be consistent. For example, trade and security policies need to better identify potential conflicts with the goals of democracy support and support the development of democracy coherently. Development policy should not be used to narrow the space for democratic politics, for example through economic policy conditionality. While democracy cannot be a priority in all foreign policy, activity in other policy areas should never undermine democracy work.

12. Future reports on foreign and security policy, international economic relations, and development cooperation, as well as Finland's UN strategy, must consistently consider the strengthening of democracy and the state of civil society. This should become Finland's goal for international advocacy.
13. Results-based approaches, for example in poverty reduction, must not mean indifference to democracy and, more broadly, to the country-level processes by which results are sought. A mere emphasis on results will likely lead to indirect support for authoritarian regimes that grow their economies.

## The emphasis on democracy work to promote gender equality, non-discrimination and innovation should be pursued with determination

14. The emphasis on gender equality and equity is important to continue in the development of democracy. Democracy work must be promoted whereby people from minority groups are activated to participate in society. Democracy should be developed as genuine opportunities for participation at all levels of society. Adequate transparency in civil society is a prerequisite for a functioning democracy.
15. Alongside defending democracy, we must also consider its development. It is essential to identify democratic innovations and respond to them, especially in the Global South.
16. It should be noted that the opponents of democracy are not just regimes. Organised counter-democratic forces such as the antigender movement must be identified and responded to with determination. More broadly, there is a need to learn to recognise the differences between NGOs in terms of how they position themselves in relation to local power holders.



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